

TAKUMI YOSHINO

吉野 匠

Illustration: MID



雨の日に生まれた戦士

1



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疾走するレインの後を追うように、
残像がガルブレイクの横を通り過ぎ、
彼の背後へと綺麗に流れていく。
風が収まり、二人が静止する――

Rain's afterimage passed through Garblake's side as if it was chasing after its original and settled behind him in one smooth flow.

同時に、全ての残像はレインの立ち姿へと収束した。
レインさへ

The wind died down, and the two warriors stood still — meanwhile, Rain's multiple afterimages converged into his upright figure.



嫌がるのを無理矢理に握りしめ、じつと黒瞳くろめを覗き込んだ。
「今日のことは、生涯しょうがい忘れないとも」

He stared deeply into Rain's black eyes and kept his grasp firm, despite how much Rain seemed to dislike it.

"I'll never forget what you've done for me today for as long as I live."



主な登場人物



【ダグラス王】
サンクワールの王



【セノア】
レインの副官



【レニ】
レインの副官



【ゲエン】
ラルファスの副官



【ガルブレイク】
ザーマインの将軍



【ルミナス】
ガルブレイクの副官



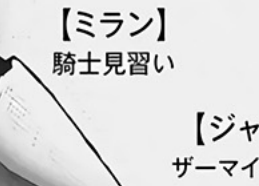
【ナイゼル】
ラルファスの副官



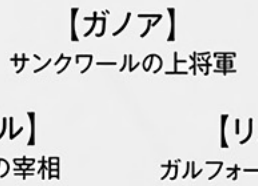
【ユーリ】
ザーマインの間諜



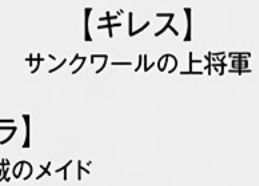
【ギンター】
レインの腹心。主に諜報を担当



【ミラン】
騎士見習い



【ガノア】
サンクワールの上将軍



【ギレス】
サンクワールの上将軍

【ジャギル】
ザーマインの宰相

【リエラ】
ガルフォート城のメイド

※ユーリとギンターのイラストは単行本より収録。

レイン

本編の主人公。本人曰く、
「傲岸不遜と常勝不敗が
売りの、世界最強の男」



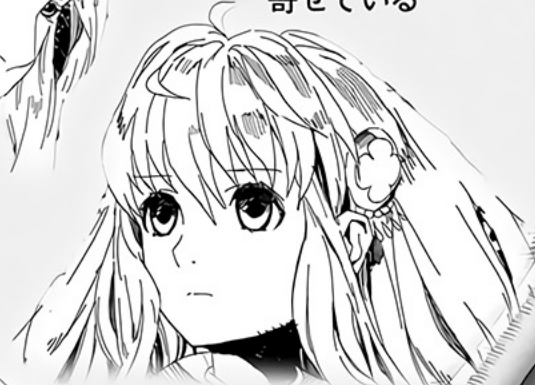
ラルファス

レインの親友で、
サンクワールの上将軍



シェルフア

サンクワールの姫君。
レインに好意を
寄せている



レイグル

大国ザーマインを
統べる王



Prologue

King Leygur, who had been leisurely taking a walk in the hidden gardens of his castle, felt a presence and promptly stopped in his tracks.

The guards who had been stationed in the vicinity had disappeared at some point, and a number of men that he was quite familiar with intruded the courtyard in their stead.

They were generals who served Zarmine, and were currently vassals to Leygur.

However, their forced show of respect had vanished without a trace and had now been replaced with bloodlust...

“Oh? Have you come to save me some trouble? To think that you would reveal your true natures on your own.”

Leygur brushed away his silver hair, which was long enough to cover one of his black eyes, and glared.

A frosty expression took hold of his stunning visage.

The four generals, who held pride in their battle experience, succumbed to the impulse to instinctively step away from Leygur’s unfaltering attitude.

But their representative, Arvin, a middle-aged man around his forties, spoke up in a loud voice.

“Silence! We have endured in silence ever since you killed the previous king five years ago. However! This is our limit! We can no longer ignore the fact that you bring aimless strife upon this world!”

The other three unanimously shouted out in agreement. Keeping up with the momentum, they each drew their swords. Four longwords

flashed in the sunlight and gleamed as one.

Nevertheless, Leygur continued to retain his composure.

He appeared to be in his twenties, and he should have been inexperienced in comparison to the generals when it came to combat, but the only word he spat out in response was, “ridiculous.”

“What?!”

“Did you truly think that you could ever hope to defeat me? To think that you were such fools. In any case, I’ll gladly take the opportunity rid myself of a few nuisances.”

He gazed at them as if they were mere objects.

“What I currently seek is a subordinate who has surpassed all others- no,”

He stopped mid-sentence and burst out in laughter.

“I want a strong and capable subordinate who has not only surpassed all others, but can even take down the strongest mythical beasts. I don’t need mediocre people like you, who can’t even measure your own worth. Especially for my plans to come.”

The four generals knit their eyebrows at the king’s words.

The strongest mythical beast referred to dragons, which lived for thousands of years, so Leygur must have been talking about Dragon Slayers.

They were only spoken of in ancient legends.

It was said that those who defeated a dragon, the strongest mythical beast, on their own would inherit all of its powers.

.....Of course, such people only existed in mere legends.

“Ludicrous. You truly are insane. We should have done this much

earlier,”

One of the generals, Piers, spat out.

Leygur simply laughed in response.

“Ludicrous, you say? No matter. You will all be dying here anyway. The rest of this discussion no longer pertains to you-”

Leygur moved just as he finished speaking. An ominous crimson light burned bright before the four traitors.

Leygur unsheathed his magic sword and drew its blade, which gave off a blood-red magical aura, and instantaneously closed the distance between himself and Piers.

His speed had surely surpassed the realm of human ability.

The only thing that the battle-hardened Piers could do was to bring up his sword.

Leygur was so overwhelmingly fast that he only appeared as a blur.

The magic sword came down like a bolt of lightning and split Piers and his raised sword vertically in two.

Without missing a beat, Leygur quickly regained his distance. Piers’ corpse split all the way down through his armor just moments later. His freshly spilt blood sprayed out like a fountain and fell down like rain upon his dumbfounded colleagues.

Arvin involuntarily gasped and took several steps backwards. Casually, Leygur raised his hand and called out in a small voice, “Magic light!”

And a burst of white magical light turned into a torrent that surged forth from the palm of his hand.

Too afraid to move, Arvin took the blast head-on and fell to the ground as his torso was charred black.

The remaining two generals hastily retreated from the smoking corpse.

“Ma, magic?! But he never even chanted a rune!”

“This, this isn’t humanly possible! You couldn’t possibly be-”

Leygur did not let him finish.

He casually closed in again and swung the magic sword sideways in a perfect arc, beheading both of them at once.

They could not even scream in pain.

Both of them died in an instant. Their already empty eyes stared reproachfully up at the sky, and their blood began to dye the earth around them.

When they had been alive, they had been generals whose valor had been known throughout the land. Yet, all four of them had unquestionably been turned into corpses in just ten seconds.

Without changing his expression, Leygur sheathed his cherished magic sword, “Justice,” back into its scabbard.

He turned his eyes away from the dead and calmly looked up at the heavens.

“Well then, I believe it’s finally time for me to have to search for new subordinates. I wonder whether someone who meets my expectations exists in this world...”

He twisted his lips as he whispered to himself.

Well, it wasn’t as if he hadn’t any candidates.

--Perhaps it was about time to test *him* out.

Chapter 1 - Rain, Under House Arrest

– *The royal castle of Sunkwoll, Galfort Castle.* –

A large crowd of statesmen had gathered around the red-carpeted audience chamber.

They were holding a war council today.

King Douglass sat on his throne, elevated before the civil and military officers who were lined up in order of social status on his left and right.

Most of the people present had blond hair and blue eyes..... In other words, they were nobles.

Only Rain, who was kneeling before the king, stood out with his slick black hair and black eyes. Today, his eyes shined with a glint more mischievous than usual.

He always wore a daring, yet brazen, expression on this face regardless of the situation, and today was no exception.

At the very least, that was how it Ralphus saw it.

Ralphus himself had a slender face with well-organized features, and did not look anything like Rain.

Normally, he had a kind-looking face that would make all of the girls within Galfort Castle, regardless of their social rank, stir up a fuss, but at the moment his face was twisted in extreme distress.

Rain, that's enough, he thought --unfortunately, Ralphus' prayer did not reach his best friend.

“As I have explained to you before, blindly accepting Zarmine’s

extremely obvious invitation is not a good tactic. It is simply absurd to send out soldiers in this situation. It would be the same thing as leaping head-first into the enemy's trap."

Rain raised his voice to emphasize his sarcasm.

Fury burned in King Douglass' eyes as he glared at the insolent man.

"Damn you, watch your mouth! Not only are you disapproving of my strategy, but you are also insulting it!"

Douglass, who had a large battle-scar running down his cheek, shook in anger as he shouted.

All of the civil officers present trembled in fear as Douglass lashed out, but Rain, the actual object of his anger, remained completely unaffected. To the contrary, the corners of his mouth were upturned in a faint smile, as if he was enjoying the situation.

He was more courageous than the average man.To the point that you could even say he was shameless.

To prove that point, Rain cast a quick glance at Ralphus's direction and smiled smugly.

Ralphus tried to question Rain with his eyes, but his friend had already turned to face forward again.

And once again Rain admonished the king --or rather, he protested,

"Strategy? Your Majesty, I don't think you can call attacking forty-thousand enemies head-on with only ten-thousand soldiers a proper strategy. Although it is a rather certain method for suicide....."

"What?!"

King Douglas grit his teeth in fury. His was finally at the end of his patience.

Ralphus had no idea what Rain was trying to do. Rain, of all people, should have known that the king had a short temper. At this rate, Rain would seriously get executed by the king.

Rain, are you really that dissatisfied with the king's verdict.....?

It had only been a month since Zarmine, the strongest kingdom in the north, had destroyed Lunan.

Even Lunan, which had bordered Sunkwoll to the north and had fought with them for many long years, had not stood a chance against Zarmine.

But the people of Sunkwoll could not celebrate the fact that one of their enemies had fallen.

No matter how you looked at it, Zarmine's next target was none other than Sunkwoll, the small kingdom at the southwestern edge of the continent of Murgenia.

Of course, Sunkwoll had taken extra precautions after the fall of Lunan. Checkpoints had been established at the former border to Lunan as a measure against foreign spies, and each high general had begun to ready their personal armies for war under the king's orders.

And, just as Sunkwoll had feared, King Leygur had finally mobilized an impossibly large army at the end of last month.

Under orders from Leygur's commanders, Zarmine's entire army had begun to move south. Even a child could tell you that their target was Sunkwoll.

King Douglas, too, had hardened his resolve to defeat Zarmine with a surprise attack and had ordered all seven high generals of his army to depart for battle.

All of the high generals below Ralphus in rank had followed those orders and had brought their personal armies into Galfort castle one after another.

--Except for Rain, who had readily ignored his orders and had arrived empty-handed. This alone was enough to result in severe punishment.

In addition to that was his rebellious protest.....it was no wonder that Ralphus was anxious for him.

“Rain, I have promoted you to the rank of a high general and have even granted you land befitting of your title despite your common blood. You have received the highest prestige a knight could ever attain, and yet...!”

The king was so angry that he was at a loss for words. In contrast, Rain responded off-handedly,

“Right. Yeah, well, I’m pretty grateful for that.”

No matter how you heard it, he didn’t sound grateful at all. Instead, he sounded like he was making fun of the king.

“How dare you! Such insolence! Then why? Why won’t you obey your orders?!”

A sigh echoed throughout the chamber.

Of course, it was Rain who had sighed.

“That’s what I’ve been telling you. I am opposed to the idea of clashing with an enemy when we have neither superior military might nor a proper plan. Won’t you please just get it already?”

Rain shook his head in exasperation before he continued,

“To battle a large army with a small regiment and fall gloriously on the battlefield --as someone who has worked their way up from being a mercenary, suicide tactics aren’t really to my preference.”

“What do you mean they “aren’t to your preference,” you fool! Your preferences do not matter!”

Voices of agreement clamored throughout the chamber.

They had been from the five high generals excluding Ralphus who represented Sunkwoll's military affairs. Rain's reputation was extremely poor even among his colleagues. Then again, the man himself could not have cared any less, either.

"The land that was once Lunan now belongs to Zarmine, meaning that it is enemy territory. You would have to be insane to think that we could just nonchalantly walk in and prepare for a surprise attack."

"Da, damn you! Is that how you address your king?!"

Douglas raged as he finally pulled his sword out of its scabbard.

He stood up from his throne and took long strides towards Rain. Voices rose up in commotion.

Among them were many voices of anticipation.



I cannot allow this to happen!

Ralphus thought as he quickly ran forward and stood in front of Rain, shielding him from the king.

“Please wait, Your Majesty!”

“Out of my way, Ralphus! I will not pardon him today!”

“Even still, to cut him down..... You’re going too far!”

“You will remain silent, Ralphus!”

“No, I will not!”

The chamber fell into silence before the full force of Ralphus’ spirited voice. Even the king had lowered his sword in surprise.

Ralphus was generally a calm man, but was known to act like a different person altogether from time to time. This was one of those times.

Without changing his posture, Ralphus continued,

“We are about to go to war, and yet you are about to cut down an ally. Please give this matter a little more thought.”

Someone else refuted Ralphus’ pleas in the place of the daunted king.

It was Ganoa, one of the high generals, who twitched his scrawny cheeks as he snobbishly proclaimed,

“Lord Ralphus, even if you are trying to protect your friend, your conduct goes against the will of the His Majesty.”

--In other words, he was telling Ralphus to shut up and watch.

His colleague, Gilles, nodded repeatedly in agreement at his side. In contrast to Ganoa, who was slim and had a haughty countenance,

Gilles was as fat as a round barrel. Both men were strongly mindful of their status as nobles, and thus had the worst relationships with Rain.

They were undoubtedly hoping for Rain to be executed. Ralphus was also from a prestigious noble lineage, and was a distant relative of the royal family, but had always disliked the two.

“You fools!”

Ralphus lashed out.

“Our enemies will be the only ones to rejoice if Rain was to die here. Can you not understand this?”

Ganoa opened his mouth to try to say something sullen in retort, but closed his mouth after one look at Ralphus’ furious expression. Gilles did the same.

King Douglas, too, sheathed his sword back into his scabbard with a bitter face. He had probably felt as if Ralphus’ words had been directed at himself. He returned to his throne with a heavy gait and glowered at Ralphus and Rain.

“Forget it. Beheading him here would achieve nothing.”

“Yep, exactly,”

Rain interrupted lightly as if he was talking about someone else’s fate.

Deep wrinkles etched themselves between the king’s brows.

Ralphus held Rain back with one hand, as if he was telling him to shut up. Then, he knelt by his friend’s side.

“Thank you very much for listening, You Majesty.”

“However, it is still a fact that he has come here alone without his soldiers. It doesn’t change the fact that he has ignored his orders, and

that it may happen again in the future. I cannot simply absolve him of his crimes.”

“That is true, but...”

Troubled, Ralphus stole a quick glance at Rain, who was looked back at Ralphus as if this wasn’t his concern. Even though he was about to be punished by the king, Rain didn’t look serious at all.

Helplessly, Ralphus continued,

“Your Majesty, how do you find ordering Rain to be put under house arrest?”

“House arrest, is it?”

“Indeed. At any rate, he is not prepared to fight this war, so I believe this is an appropriate punishment.”

“Hmm.....”

King Douglas stroked his thick beard and made a grim face. He disliked Ralphus’ proposal, but could not reject it outright because Ralphus was a prominent noble from a powerful bloodline. Although he was the king, his ancestry was inferior to Ralphus’ by a notch.

“I find it somewhat lacking as punishment,”

The king muttered in discontent.

“That is not the case,”

Ralphus replied without a moment’s delay, and continued on to propose something that he himself did not believe in.

“If Your Majesty was to lead the army against Zarmine and return triumphant, then even Rain would have to acknowledge his own ignorance. He would lose face to us as well. There is no greater punishment for a knight bound by honor.”

Ralphus said this purposefully, despite knowing that Rain would cast aside his knightly honor without a second thought.

“Hmm..... That is, well...”

“It is as such. Your Majesty, your verdict please.”

At Ralphus’ urging, the king looked like he had swallowed dirt as he proclaimed,

“Very well then. Rain, I order you to be put under house arrest in your lands. Be grateful that your punishment was no harsher than this!”

“Sire! I am truly thankful for your kindness!!”

Rain replied in a cherry voice as he lowered his head in an empty show of respect. He cast a sidelong glance at Ralphus, who was bowing at his side, and winked with an audacious smile.

Had he planned for all of this to happen? If so, then he was truly a man to be feared.

Ralphus could only smile back wryly.

Then again, there was nothing better than the fact that his friend would remain safe; since no matter how you looked at it, it was impossible to win this war.

Ganoa and Gilles had been staring coldly at Ralphus and Rain during that time, but for better or worse, Ralphus had not noticed.

Afterwards, the war council had concluded without another comment.

Ralphus invited Rain to his personal chambers within the castle.

If he was to head to war, then this could be their last meeting in this lifetime.

“Would you care for a drink?”

“Yeah, sounds good,”

Rain replied in a spirited voice.

Rain sat down heavily on the sofa once they had entered Ralphus' private chambers. He crossed his legs high in the air and made himself at home.

Ralphus brought out a bottle of wine and two wineglasses from a cabinet that was nestled into a bookshelf and poured two glasses of wine. Then, he took a seat across from Rain.

After finishing his glass in one go, Rain immediately poured himself another. He was drinking as heavily as he always did. Ralphus drank his own glass of wine slowly as he peered into his friend's face.

Rain's youthful visage had not changed since the time they had first met. In any case, he did not look like he was the same age as Ralphus -twenty-five years old. He looked to be eighteen or twenty at most.

Ralphus, who was of Sunkwoll's noble bloodline and was rumored to have elvish ancestry in his lineage, lived longer and consequently aged slower than other people. However, he could only guess as to why Rain remained so youthful, since the same explanation did not hold true for his friend.

He realized that he knew next to nothing about Rain.

As Ralphus was contemplating, Rain suddenly said,

“By the way, sorry about before.”

“What are you sorry about? Your house arrest? What, so you really were counting on me to intervene, weren't you?”

“Yeah, it was within my expectations.”

“Then you could have at least told me beforehand. What were you

going to do if I hadn't stopped His Majesty?"

"I believed that you'd definitely stop him. Besides, how could I have told you when you can't even act to save your life?"

"Hmph. You're right, though."

Ralphus understood where Rain was coming from. If he had heard Rain's plan from the beginning, he most certainly would have given it away.

"But to think that you of all people would go out of your way avoid this war. Do you really think we have no chance of winning?"

"At this rate, we don't even have a hair's breadth of a chance to win,"

Rain guaranteed Sunkwoll's defeat in a truly relaxed manner. He continued,

"All of this is just a part of Zarmine's trap. They're even marching slowly on purpose. They're planning to gang up on us with their superior numbers once we're within their reach."

".....You're probably right. Then, what do you think we should do? Wouldn't they attack us eventually, even if we ignore them for now?"

"We would just need to fight them in Sunkwoll territory. But, either you or I would have to devise our strategy, and we would also have to be the ones commanding the army."

"That's..... But....."

Ralphus grimaced.

King Douglas detested it when other people interfered with his proposed strategies. Although he was more forgiving about other matters, he would not listen to even Ralphus' suggestions regarding this war.

“It’s impossible, no? Then, there’s nothing more to be done; this is the end. Simple numbers settle everything -it’s how war works in this world.”

“--Yeah, I guess.”

His response was somewhat vague, but Ralphus had understood what Rain was saying.

Rain’s analysis had been cold, but accurate. King Douglas could hold his own in battle, but lacked the brainpower necessary to formulate a strategy that kept the general picture in mind. The outcome was clear no matter how you looked at it.

“In any case, it’s not as if I’m the type of person who would throw away his life for his king. It just doesn’t suit me launch a suicide attack when I have no chance at winning.”

Ralphus tilted his wineglass in silence.

Rain was being sarcastic, but he was not necessarily wrong.

The King had forced Rain into many unpleasant situations before with his ridiculous orders, so it would have been stranger for Rain to willingly sacrifice his life for him.

To begin with, Rain was an ex-mercenary who was not very loyal to his kingdom. Perhaps he was not loyal at all.

But to each his own. It would also be fine for there to be a fool who would stand his ground and fight to the bitter end.

Rain stared intently at Ralphus.

“Your face tells me that you’d go even if I told you not to participate in the war.”

“Yeah. I’m glad for your concern, though.”

“--Not really. It’s just too bad that I’ll lose someone to leech off of.”

“Is that so?”

Ralphus laughed quietly.

Rain stood up abruptly after draining the rest of his glass in one go.

“Well then. It’s about time for me to go. I’m under house arrest, at any rate.”

“Okay. Make sure to take care of yourself, alright? Though my words probably fall on deaf ears.”

“Nah, you’re the one who has to take care, you know?”

Rain’s mask came off and Ralphus was able to glimpse his underlying uneasiness for a brief moment, but he had promptly returned to normal in the next.

Rain left the room as if he was simply going out for a walk without betraying his disheartened mood. Ralphus followed him out into the hallway to see him off.

“Oh yeah,”

Rain said, remembering something right as he was about to leave,

“I’ve been thinking of asking you for a while, but do you know of a girl called Michelle? She should be about sixteen now, and she’s probably a noble.”

“Michelle? Hmm..... Do you know anything else about her?”

“Let’s see. Well, she has straight blond hair that goes all the way down to her waist, and she has a face so pretty that you wouldn’t believe it..... She has a nice voice, too.”

“That wasn’t helpful at all. There are a lot of nobles,”

Ralphus said, considerably exasperated. He continued,

“Still, isn’t she too young for you? Certainly, I may not know much about relationships between a man and a woman, but.....”

“NO! It’s not like that. I’m not into that kind of stuff. It’s just, I’ve made a promise.”

“A promise?”

“Never mind; it’s fine if you don’t know. I already know where I can probably find her.”

With a wave of his hand, Rain turned around and walked away as if nothing had happened.

He never once looked back.

Ralphus, who had returned to his chambers, continued to drink alone while thinking about his best friend.

Recalling the unfavorable war before him, he realized that he would never see that liberal man again unless he stumbled into some great fortune.....

Knock knock

An awfully reserved knock fell onto Ralphus’s ears as he was deeply submerged in his thoughts. Its owner was too timid to be his aide, Gwen.

“I’m coming. Who is-- Your Royal Highness the Princess?!”

When he casually opened the door, he found Princess Shelfa waiting patiently on the other side.

She had straight blond hair that reached all the way down to her waist, and her skin was so white that it was almost transparent. Her gentle and charming eyes, which were slightly larger than most, seemed to understand everything for what it was.

She usually wore an expression of loneliness, but she looked

somewhat cheerful today. She stopped Ralphus, who was about to reflexively bend down on one knee, with a dainty hand.

“Please don’t, Lord Ralphus. Um..... Could I have a moment of your time?”

“Of course. Please, come in,”

Ralphus invited the princess inside even as his mind was reeling. He had heard that the princess disliked people quite a bit, so he couldn’t even begin to guess why she was here.....

Ralphus had hardly ever met with the princess, who was sixteen this year.

At the very most, he had only greeted her when they crossed paths within the palace. It wasn’t as if Ralphus avoided her on purpose, but rather that the princess had confined herself within her personal chambers in the heart of the palace.

However, she hadn’t done so out of her own volition, but because her father, King Douglas, had mandated it.

In any case, her visit was unexpected.

The princess surveyed the room with great curiosity as she sat on the sofa.

“So, what brings you here today?”

“Well..... Um, is it true that you are friends with Rain, Lord Ralphus? I heard that you were from one of the maids.”

“.....Yes. He is certainly a good friend of mine.”

She had addressed Rain without his title. Was she close to him?

Ralphus became even more perplexed.

“Then, would you happen to know where Rain is at the moment? I

heard that he was here in the castle today, but I could not find him anywhere.”

Ralphus probably looked very puzzled to her, because she then whispered,

“This is a secret from my father. I’ve snuck out of my chambers because I wanted to see Rain.”

“--I see. You wanted to see Rain,”

Was all he could muster in response.

The beautiful princess, who had leaned towards him to whisper, was blushing faintly red. Anyone could tell that Rain was important to her.

Just when had he met Her Royal Highness?

It was a mystery. Rain hardly ever visited Galfort Castle to begin with.

“He was here until a moment ago..... But unfortunately, he had to return to his castle because he was put under house arrest.”

“Oh.....”

Princess Shelfa muttered piteously. She looked so disappointed that Ralphus was afraid that she would burst out in tears.

“It couldn’t be helped. Besides, things probably worked out better for him this way.”

Sympathizing for her plight, Ralphus told her about what had happened during the war council in great detail after asking her not to tell anyone else. He told her everything that had happened, including Rain’s scheming.

“I.....See. If Rain went out of his way to do that, then there must really be no hope left for this kingdom,”

The princess said in a voice filled with her infinite trust for Rain.

“Although I do not wish to acknowledge it.”

“Indeed.”

Letting out a soft sigh, the princess pulled out a pendant from the bosom of her white robes and stared at it intently. Attached to the end of its silver chain was an old coin with a hole through the top.

When she realized that Ralphus was looking at her, she held the coin out in her pale hands for him to see.

“I’ll let you see this, Lord Ralphus, because you are a friend of Rain’s. I received this coin from him. It is my treasure.”

“I am honored. It appears to be rather old, although I can’t say that it looks like it was meant to be worn as an accessory.”

It would have been more accurate to say that it was worn out. It looked like a silver coin, but etched on its dirty surface was a string of words that had been written in a language he did not know.

“This is a magic coin.”

“Magic, you say?”

“Yes. I cannot tell you what it does because I’ve promised not to, but looking at it always cheers me up when I am feeling down. However, it seems that its magic will work only once.”

Magic items were exceedingly rare these days. This was because there were almost no rune masters left to charge items with magic anymore.

However, after listening to Shelfa’s words..... Ralphus felt a shiver run down his spine.

Ralphus had also received a magic item from Rain before.

It had happened while Sunkwall was still at war with Lunan and the king had ordered Ralphus to depart for battle. Ralphus had been drinking with Rain on the night before he left when Rain had said he would give him something nice.

“Something nice?”

“Yeah. This is something I found by chance while I was exploring some ruins in the North..... Well, take a look,”

Rain had said smugly. What he had held out in his hands, however, looked like an ordinary rock with a slightly greenish tint.

“Hmm? It looks like an ordinary rock to me.”

“Ugh, this is why you amateurs are so..... This will only work once, but it’ll protect its owner from mortal danger and break apart in its owner’s stead. It’s true; I’m not lying.”

“Well well!”

Ralphus had replied in admiration.

“I’ll give this to you just in case. Take it with you to battle. It’s fine, just take it. In exchange, drinks are on you tonight.”

Before they had parted, Rain had reminded Ralphus once again that he was not lying about the rock.

Deeply grateful to his friend, Ralphus had brought the magic stone with him to the battlefield.

He had even thought that the rock had worked.

An enemy arrow had been fired at his throat during the fierce battle that had ensued. However, Ralphus had escaped certain death and the arrow had only left a red streak across his neck. The rock that Rain had given him had disappeared during the battle, so Ralphus had thought that its magic had worked.

Yet, when he had gone drinking with Rain after he had returned home and had stated his thanks, Rain had readily replied,

“Oh. That was just a normal rock. I picked it up off the roadside.”

“.....What did you say?”

“Hey, don’t get angry. It was reassuring to have, wasn’t it? It’s important to have a good mindset and all that in battle, right? Man~, good for you~; what a happy ending~.”

Ralphus had spat out his drink as Rain hit him hard across the back--

Ralphus unintentionally cleared his throat as he recalled his traumatic past.

Seeing that the princess was beaming with joy, he nervously asked,

“By the way, Princess, did Rain happen to say anything about that silver coin?”

After blinking several times, she answered,

“Let me see..... Rain seems to have traveled all over the world, but I think he said that he had found this magic item by chance while exploring some ruins in the North-- or something to that extent.”

“Is, is that so?”

That bastard!

Ralphus broke out in cold sweat.

Failing to notice Ralphus’ internal distress, the princess happily continued,

“Rain is so strange. I had never doubted him, but he kept insisting that he wasn’t lying.”

“Ye, yes..... That is strange indeed..... Haha, hahaha.”

The princess laughed elegantly with a hand placed daintily at her lips, but Ralphus did not share in her delight.

Instead, he had sobered up at once.

In any case, he decided to change the topic. He would interrogate Rain for more details if he ever met the man again.

“Well, regardless of what it can do, if the magic only works once, you should keep it safe without wasting it.”

“Yes, that is what I intend to do.”

“I’m relieved to hear that.”

“You are?”

“--No, no it’s nothing. Leaving that aside, would you happen to know of someone named Michelle, Princess?”

He had casually uttered that name in an attempt to change the topic, but the Princess had jumped to her feet in surprise.

“Where did you hear that name? From Rain!? You heard it from Rain, yes?”

All Ralphus could do in the face of the princess’ passionate outburst was to nod and freeze in place. He realized too late that if the princess had held romantic feelings for Rain, he should have not voiced the name of another woman.

Contrary to his expectations, however, the princess smiled in wonder and gathered her slender hands. Dreamily, she said,

“Rain has been thinking about Michelle, hasn’t he, Lord Ralphus?”

“Yes..... I suppose. He only asked me if I knew of her. That was all.....”

The princess did not appear to have heard his response. With her cheeks flushed red, she muttered, “I see, so Rain remembers” over and over again. She was the very picture of a maiden in love. She probably didn’t even realize that Ralpus was there with her anymore.

I really cannot understand women,

Ralpus thought seriously to himself.

~~*~~*~~*~~

A low song carried over on the wind.

For the umpteenth time, Yuri glanced down at the ground from atop her horse for any rocks she could throw in frustration, but eventually decided to endure it for the sake of her mission.

She was a girl of sixteen or seventeen with a blue blouse and a white skirt.

Her neat black hair fell gracefully at the top of her shoulders. Her light green eyes, which darted around like a squirrel’s, shined in determination. She had a face that most men would find cute, but was currently twisted it in irritation.

--Geez, how much longer is that jerk planning on singing that god-awful song! On top of that, he’s only wearing a shirt and a pair of pants in this cold weather. He’s a weirdo; he’s totally a weirdo!

Could there possibly anybody more tone-deaf than him? His singing was so bad that it left her dumbfounded. His song was a love story about some man and some woman, but it honestly just sounded like noise to her.

Or rather, she even felt as if his singing was shortening her lifespan.

He was just that bad.

Yuri maintained her distance from the singer and tailed him while holding back the urge to cover her ears.

That man-- Rain, a high general of this kingdom, was known as the “Unknown Genius” in Zarmine.

Well, not many people called him that anymore because he was rather famous now. Still, there was no doubt that he was regarded highly in other countries. His military exploits were well-known throughout the whole land.

In fact, Yuri had also been extremely nervous before she had laid her eyes on him. Now, not even a fraction of her initial anxiety remained.

I want to drop everything and hurry home --Yuri thought, but she couldn't do so because her orders had come from the prime minister himself.

Yuri sighed. For the time being, she had to stick to this man no matter what.

Oblivious to Yuri's feelings, Rain continued to sing in his thunderous voice while riding atop his finely bred white horse.

He didn't seem to care that he was in the middle of the busy capital filled with rows of small stores. He completely ignored all of the snickering from the people who were walking down the street. Rain was truly quite the character.

However, Yuri did not want to get even a millimeter closer to him.

Even now, she stayed as far away from Rain as possible so passersby would not accidentally think that she was his companion. Besides, he was technically a stranger to her.

Then..... Rain suddenly stopped his murderous singing and muttered something. When Yuri desperately strained her ears, she heard him say,

“How about it, Kris, you hungry?”

Yuri looked up at the sky in exasperation.

She had heard this line so many times that she didn't even feel like complaining, “who the hell is Kris? There's no one there!” anymore.

Along the way, Yuri had eventually figured out that Kris was the name of Rain's horse. In other words, Rain, the supposed genius, had the childish hobby of talking to horses.

He was a difficult fellow to understand.

Why do I have to tail this useless guy who doesn't live up to his rumors.....?

Even though there was no way the horse could respond, Rain persistently pestered his horse again and again.

Just then, Rain nodded in satisfaction.

“Okay, I gotcha. The food can wait till later, right Kris?”

He said, and began his murderous singing again as if nothing had happened.

Without thinking, Yuri cursed under her breath. This was the first time that she had found a mission so unpleasant.

It wasn't just because of the singing.

To begin with, Rain held the prestigious title of high general, but he peered into random stores like the average country bumpkin. He even seemed to show more interest in the store's wares if the storekeeper was a (beautiful) woman.

He would not move on until he had spoken a word or two with them.

This guy's an idiot of a womanizer.

Yuri's opinion of Rain plummeted down beyond the point of no return.

Meanwhile, Rain suddenly turned behind the corner of a local tavern.

And there you go, acting on another whim,

Yuri thought as she hurried behind him into the alley.

“--! Ahhh!”

She had almost run straight into Rain.

She had thought that he had already proceeded ahead, but he had dismounted his horse and was leaning against the tavern wall instead. As soon as he saw Yuri, he casually raised a hand in greetings.

“Hey! Why don't we talk for a bit?”

Crap. He couldn't possibly have known that I was tailing..... no, I can still fix this! He's an idiot.

After allowing her face to cycle through a world of colors, Yuri regained her senses and forced her expression into one of a naïve young girl's. She opened her eyes as wide as she could, and said,

“Huh? Have you mistaken me for someone else, Sir Knight?”

“A mistake.....huh,”

Rain replied as he scrutinized Yuri up and down before making a show of shrugging his shoulders. He continued,

“Well, I don't mind either way. Could you get off your horse for a bit? I want to talk.”

She hesitated at first, but then she realized that she couldn't have him be suspicious of her. In the end, she reluctantly dismounted off her horse.

“So, did you need something from me?”

“Nothing much. I just wanted to know why you’ve *coincidentally* been following me ever since I left the castle,”

Rain said, putting a considerably amount of emphasis on the word ‘coincidentally.’

Yuri suddenly found herself at a loss. She had thought that he was a simple fool, but he had realized that she had been tailing him ever since he had left Galfort Castle. She could not write it off as mere ‘coincidence.’

This, this could be bad..... Yuri thought as she broke out in sweat while trying to lie her way out.

“Uh, umm..... I guess I’ll come clean, but the truth is, I fell in love the moment I laid my eyes on you, Sir Knight, and I’ve been blindly following you even since.”

Yuri rambled on in one breath while resisting the urge to vomit. Rain replied,

“Oh? You fell in love with me at first sight?”

As he laughed. Yuri laughed along with him.

After they had laughed for some time, Rain abruptly stopped laughing and declared,

“You’re lying.”

“What?! It’s true~! Your all-black getup is super cool!”

“Are you still sticking to that story? Listen, I already know I’m handsome.”

What an exceptionally egoistic idiot, Yuri thought as she immediately lowered her personal evaluation of Rain. He continued,

“Even still, I’m not going to buy such an obvious excuse.”

“But it’s really true~! I’ve completely fallen head over heels for you.....”

Yuri closed her mouth when Rain threw out a hand to stop her. After a forced sigh, Rain cut straight to the point.

“I’ll spell it out for you since you keep insisting on playing dumb. You’re a spy from Zarmine, aren’t you? Admit it.”

I’ve been found out!

Yuri thought as she reached for the dagger hidden underneath her skirt and tried to leap backwards. She was confident in her ability to run away, and she could fight better than the average knight if she had to. She hadn’t been trained in Zarmine for nothing.

In any case, that was what she had thought until now.

--However, she soon found herself unable to leap.

The dark silhouette of a sword moved towards her with a faint whistle while creating afterimages in its wake.

A vibrant blue beam of light drew a semicircle-shaped trail in the air and filled up Yuri’s vision.

She had been rendered unable to move before she could realize what was happening.

Before she could even begin to reach for her dagger, Rain had thrust his sword against her throat at a speed too fast for the eyes to follow.

It wasn’t an ordinary longsword, either. It was a magical sword that gave off an aura of magical light.....a magic sword.

A bluish white light danced up from its blade in waves, and it emitted a hum akin to the buzzing of numerous insects.

It looked incredibly sharp. In any case, she definitely did not want to test the sword against her own flesh.

Yuri gulped.

“N-No way. That was so fast.”

“Of course it was. I’m a genius, you know,”

Rain said arrogantly as he brushed back his hair with one hand. His behavior really tried her patience, but Yuri was not in any position to argue.

To top it all, the stupid horse named Kris seemed to be looking down on her, which pissed Yuri off even more.

But that was probably just a coincidence.

“H-how.....”

“How did I find out? Well, it’s impossible to tail me without me knowing because I’m sensitive to people’s presences, and besides, you don’t move like a normal girl.”

“No way.”

“Hmph. It just means that you’re twenty years too young to deceive my eyes,”

Rain said with abandon. Yuri wanted to hit him right there and then; yet, not only was this neither the time nor the place to do so, but she was also in danger of losing her life.

Spies were hated no matter where they were. If captured, they would immediately be put to death. More often than not, they were slain on the spot the moment they were discovered. In other words, Yuri was in an incomparably bad situation.

Oh crap! Who’s gonna take care of my little sister if I die? Is there anything I can do to get out of this, anything?! If I beg him to spare

me..... oh, but, what if he asks me to do “this” or “that” instead? This idiot’s probably a huge lecher.

While Yuri was agonizing over her situation, Rain leisurely asked her,

“So. Your name?”

“It’s Yuri.....”

“Yuri, huh? It’s an okay name. Though it’s a little awkward to say.”

While Yuri was thinking, *mind your own damn business!* Rain continued on and asked her for her age.

Since there was no point in hiding it, she answered, “sixteen,” without taking her eyes off of his magic sword. Rain seemed a little disappointed that she was too young to be his type as he absentmindedly rubbed his chin. Naturally, Rain was not Yuri’s type, either.

“Well, make sure you wear a shorter skirt next time. You know, the kind that just barely covers the good parts.”

Rain readily returned his sword to its scabbard after saying his piece. Then, he began to walk back toward his horse while humming cheerfully as Yuri stared at him in disbelief.

“Kris, we’ll have some food in just a bit, ‘kay?”

“.....Hold on a sec.”

“Oh yeah. If you’d like we could go treat ourselves in an inn on the outskirts of town, Kris.”

“.....Excuse me.”

“Oh yeah? You like that? Alright, I’ll treat you till you can’t eat another bite!”

Yuri took a giant breath and yelled at the top of her lungs,

“HEY YOUUUU!! QUIT TALKING TO THE HORSE AND LISTEN TO WHAT I HAVE TO SAY!!”

“Oh!”

Rain turned back around, startled by her sudden outburst.

His black eyes were wide open in surprise.

“Hey, don’t just starting yelling all of a sudden. I like hearing pretty voices, you know?”

“Screw your pretty voices! A-and, don’t keep talking to your horse like there’s nothing wrong with the world when I’m trembling at the thought of being killed!”

“Just when were you trembling? When? You were waiting for a chance to run away this entire time. Though it’s fifty years too early for you to try and escape from me,”

Rain retorted.

What the hell, you just added on another thirty years from last time! Yuri fumed. Ignoring her, Rain continued,

“Besides, I’ve already seen your face up close, so hurry up and scat. Go on, shoo!”

He shooed her away with his hand as if she was a fly.

Did you stop me just so you could take a look at my face?! Yuri quickly covered her mouth before she accidentally yelled out her thoughts.

“Um…… Are you letting me go, by any chance?”

“Nothing would change even if I killed you. Wouldn’t another spy just come and take your place? See? There’s no point in killing you.”

“You do have a point there..... So you’re really letting me go.”

He might be a better person than I thought he was,

Yuri thought as she looked at Rain in a new light. Normally, she would have been killed on the spot, or she would have been taken prisoner and executed. Either way, she would have ended up dead.

She hadn’t really looked at his face before, but now she realized that he had messy black hair and a chiseled, masculine face. His sharp black eyes were particularly striking. They reminded her of the proud wild wolves of the forest.

Yeah, he’s actually pretty handsome-- wait, now’s not the time for this!

Yuri suddenly grew dark again as she remembered something important.

It was great that she was still alive, but she had utterly failed her mission to tail Rain. That was problematic in and of itself. She would probably be punished once she returned to Zarmine. She could even be silenced, for good.

“What’s wrong? You’re all gloomy again,”

Rain asked from horseback.

Instead of telling him to mind his own business, Yuri quietly explained her circumstances. She figured that it would be alright because he had already saved her life once, and besides, she couldn’t find it in herself to remain silent.

After listening to her story, Rain said,

“Then why don’t you just come with me?”

Yuri looked up at him in surprise.

“Your mission was to tail me, right? Then there shouldn’t be any

problem if you came with me.”

“Wait, what? But my job is to gather intel, you know? Wouldn’t it be bad for you if I came along?”

As Yuri’s eyes widened in confusion, Rain snorted and said,

“Not really. I’m just heading back to my territory because I’ve been put under house arrest.”

“.....Come again?”

“Like I said. I’ve been put under house arrest. You know, the kind where I’m not allowed to leave my home,”

Rain explained with a strangely happy smile. He continued,

“I went to the castle without any of my troops and told the king, ‘why bother fighting when we can’t even win?’ and he generously put me under house arrest. So now I’m heading back to my castle to take a nice, long nap.”

Yuri stared on in disbelief as Rain snickered like a mischievous child. That hadn’t been the sort of thing that any self-respecting knight would say, even as a joke.

“I, I did think something was strange because you were all alone, but.....”

Yuri’s head began to ache.

I take it back. This guy’s really just an idiot.

“So, Yuri. What’cha gonna do? You coming or not?”

Rain’s voice echoed in her head.

It took the last reserves of her willpower to refrain from telling Rain to go away. Yuri was all too aware that she really did not have any other choice.

“Ugh, I’m going with you.....”

Yuri responded on the verge of tears.

It must have been a coincidence, but Kris neighed just then as if the horse had been jeering at the despondent girl.

~~*~~*~~*~~

The musky scent of flora began to mix into the chilly air.

It had taken three days on horseback to reach Rain’s territory, the land of Astel, from the capital.

In other words, Astel was undoubtedly in the countryside. You couldn’t get any more rural than Astel.

Even still, Rain was the only high general in the kingdom with territory to his name who didn’t have an ounce of noble blood in his lineage. King Douglas adhered to the social hierarchy with strict rigor, so Rain had been the only exception he had ever made.

They were trotting through a small forest thriving with long-branched southern cedars. Most of Astel consisted of woods like this or vast fields of empty plains.

Scattered throughout the plains and the woods were small villages and towns. Astel was truly a rural region.

“We’ll arrive at my castle soon; you understand the story, right? We’re gonna say that you’re a squire, so don’t talk to me so casually in front of other people. Don’t screw this up.”

“Well, yeah, okay.”

Yuri looked obviously unwilling as she nodded.

Rain and Yuri had decided to pretend that their fathers knew each other. In other words, Yuri was training to become a knight under Rain..... or so the story went.

While female knights were few and far between, they did exist, so the story itself wasn't too strange.

Actually, one of Rain's two aides was also female.

"Why are you sulking? I'm doing this for your sake. I even said you could still talk casually when no one else is around, so I'd rather you be grateful about it."

"Well, I *am* grateful, but..... I'm just not good with formalities."

"Well, it can't be helped, can it? It's not as if we can say that you just don't want to leave my side."

"Ugh, don't put it that way!"

"But it's true, right?"

Rain replied coolly.

He smiled in satisfaction as Yuri scrunched her brows and sank into silence, but then his face suddenly turned sour.

"What now?"

"It's nothing. I just remembered something unpleasant."

"Which is...?"

"It's Senoa, one of my aides. Now that I think about it, she's gonna raise a fuss once she finds out about my house arrest."

"Senoa..... If I recall correctly, she's the daughter of a prominent noble from one of the Five Great Houses, right? She was about twenty?"

"You really did your research well," Rain said in strange admiration as Yuri bent her head slightly to the side.

"Well, that is my job after all. So? Is she really going to raise such a

fuss?”

“Well, yeah, she nags like nobody’s business. She’s a beauty with an exceptional figure, so it’s a shame that her mouth ruins her physical charms. Geez, and here I’d thought that I’d found a real bargain when she first came to me half a year ago.”

“You know, the way you word things is really, really weird.....”

“Who cares? Besides, we’ll be able to see the castle soon. Once we get out of here... look!”

They had cleared the forest just as he spoke, and the vast openness stretched out before them. Yuri squinted to see where Rain was pointing.

.....But, his finger had frozen stiff midway.

Yuri’s jaw dropped as she also registered the sight before her.

“The hell is this!?”

“What in the world is this!?”

Their voices echoed in perfect sync.

~~*~~*~~

Cortecreas Caslte was Rain’s castle, and while it was small, it was well defended due to being surrounded by a deep moat and tall ramparts.

There were several spires protruding from the castle that, like the outer walls, were painted in a brilliant white.

A drawbridge was attached to the castle gates, and was currently let down.

That was fine.

The problem lied in the plaza in front of the castle gates.

There stood a force of two thousand soldiers, composed of knights that had been garrisoned at the castle and foot soldiers, lined up in the plaza.

Come war, they would form ranks and sortie from there.

The soldiers were crammed tightly into the plaza. Counting the foot soldiers, squires, and knights, almost the entirety of the castle's standing army stood there.

Each and every one of them was fit into armor and armed with a sword or spear. It was as if they were ready to sortie at any moment.

Furthermore, as if this still wasn't enough, wagons fully loaded with provisions were being drawn out of the castle one after another.

The strangest thing was how exhausted the soldiers appeared, even as they continued to work in silence.

"You tricked me!"

Yuri suddenly shouted in a shrill voice.

Rain turned his head toward her stiffly, as if the joints in his neck had rusted.

"What is that," Yuri continued, "aren't they preparing to sortie?! Everything you said about being under house arrest was a lie! You were planning on lying to me from the start so you could lock me up somewhere and have your way with me you--"

"Shut it, and stop dreaming up your pleasantly erotic fantasies!"

Rain could not help but interrupt her. He continued,

"Just who the hell would go through all that trouble just for you? Cool your head, idiot! I haven't the foggiest clue about what's going on either! I'm just as confused as you are, understand?!"

It appeared that Yuri had not understood as she immediately began to scream at Rain in return.

Unable to put up with the noise, Rain covered his ears with both hands and signaled Kris forward with his legs.

At any rate, he had to figure out what was going on.

As Rain hurried over to the plaza, an armor-covered man spotted him and came running over from the crowd.

He had rather short blond hair and blue eyes..... but unlike the nobles, the whites of his eyes were in fact, white. He had a pleasant countenance, but his expressions looked somewhat childish and caused him to appear a bit unreliable.

He was Rain's other aide, Leni. His real name was Lelbyni, but Rain called him Leni for short because Lelbyni was a mouthful to say. Both of Rain's aides commanded over one thousand soldiers.

Anyhow, Leni came over running while wiping off sweat from his brow even though it was almost the cold season. What was even more suspicious was how his eyes kept darting around restlessly.

"Oi, Leni! What's going on? Is it Zarmine? Did they already make it all the way here? Hey!"

As Rain questioned him in a hurry, Leni avoided looking at Rain's face for some reason and carefully began to make excuses.

"You see, I told her that we should stop. That haste makes waste."

".....Huh? What are you talking about?"

"W, well. Like I was saying, I really did try to stop her. I told her we should wait until you got back, General."

Rain had no idea what Leni was going on about.

Frustrated, he dismounted from Kris, grabbed Leni by the shoulder,

and shook the other man violently.

“Hey! Tell me something I can understand!”

“Yes! Like I said before, as long as you understand that I’m not at fault here..... Ah!”

Leni noticed Yuri riding towards them as he was grasping for words and quickly turned his attentions to her and cried out,

“General! Who is this lovely lady?”

“Hey, you haven’t answered my question yet.”

“Oh my. Lovely? I’m not really that.....”

Yuri brought her hands to her cheeks and acted embarrassed while ignoring Rain. Her spirits seemed to have lifted after the misunderstanding had cleared up. She continued,

“I’m here by my father’s introduction because he told me to train under General Rain. My name is Yuri. It’s nice to meet you~”

Disgusted, Rain interrupted Yuri as she gushed upon Leni in an enchanting voice.

“Hey, you! Quit waving your hands around like that! And Leni! Don’t get drawn into her antics so easily! Hurry up and explain what’s going on!”

But Leni did not live up to Rain’s expectations. He had been completely stricken by Yuri’s charms and was fawning all over her. *I’ll just have to ask someone else.....* Rain thought as he dejectedly cast his gaze at the plaza, and, just then, the crowd split in two to make room for a mysterious figure who was staggering toward him.

Simply put, it was a clump of armor.

The silvery heavy armor covered its wearer from head to toe. However, whoever was wearing the armor was unable to fully

support its weight and was unsteady on their feet. If the wearer had gone to battle in that state, they would have been the first to fall prey to enemy lances.

Rain wanted to know who this idiot was, but their face was unfortunately covered by their helmet's guard.

The enigmatic knight staggered left and right as they progressed slowly toward Rain while constantly readjusting themselves. Frankly speaking, it was creepy.

“Who is that moron, Leni?”

“Eh, well that’s--”

“Wait, never mind. I don’t want to know. I definitely don’t want to know who that is.”

Rain, who had figured out who the armored figure was as if by divine inspiration, shook his head in utter denial. He did this even knowing that his denial wouldn’t change a thing.

Sure enough, Leni took pity on him and said,

“If that’s what you wish, then I won’t force the information on you. Still, you’ll know who that is soon enough whether I tell you or not.”

“Ugh. You’re right.”

As Rain let out a heavy sigh, the armored figure drew closer, staggering like a drunkard all the way, and finally approached them while heaving their shoulders up and down.

In a voice as feeble as the autumn flies, they said,

“*Gasp, gasp*..... General..... I’ve been, eagerly awaiting, your return..... *gasp, gasp*..... Welcome back.”

“Isn’t it hard to breathe? Take off your helmet! It’s disturbing me.”

Once Rain had interrupted their long-winded speech, they threw off their clunky helmet with a large gasp.

Underneath the helmet was wavy blond hair and gradated blue eyes characteristic of the nobility. Their white skin was slick with sweat and their almond eyes were filled with anticipation as they stared at Rain.

Surprisingly, the person under the armor was a stunningly beautiful woman.

“*Gasp, gasp*..... At any rate, congratulations on your safe return, General.”

“Yeah. You’re the same as always I see, Senoa,”

Said Rain, clearly annoyed, as he looked down upon his other aide.

“So, has your breathing returned to normal now?”

“Yes, sir. Something of this degree is nothing I cannot handle.”

“I see..... Well that’s good, then.”

“I have no need for your concern. By the way, General,”

Said Senoa as she stared stiffly at Yuri, who was standing behind Rain,

“Who is this lady here?”

“Well, uh..... This is Yuri. Her father asked me to take her under my wing, so she’ll be my squire as of today.”

After his vague introduction, Rain added that his and Yuri’s fathers knew each other.

Only Leni nodded in apparent glee while Senoa maintained her stiff expression.

“Is that so..... Yuri, my name is Senoa Amelia Estherhart. My middle name, Amelia, is not my mother’s name, but my childhood name. You may address me simply as ‘Captain.’”

Even in Rain’s eyes, Senoa, whose name was as tediously long as any noble’s, had introduced herself with a hint of disdain.

Yuri seemed to share the sentiment as she responded, “pleased to meet you,” in an unfriendly tone. It seemed as if sparks were exploding between the two women’s gazes.

“Hey, you two, don’t get so high-strung all of a sudden. And Senoa, explain to me what’s going on here.”

“Hm? Explain..... you say?”

“And here you are looking like you really don’t get why I’m asking..... Like I said, explain to me why it looks like we’re about to march straight into war!”

Rain said as he pointed at the jam-packed plaza in agitation.

Senoa, who had tilted her head to the side in confusion, muttered, “oh, that’s what you meant,” and puffed out her chest in apparent pride. Her white cheeks, too, flushed red.

“Naturally, it is because I prepared the army in advance so that we could move out as soon as you’d returned, General.”

Rain stared silently at Senoa’s beautifully smug face.

And he only thing he said was,

“Are you stupid?”

“--W-wha?!”

“--Don’t ‘wha’ me! Who told you to go ahead and do this on your own? You don’t have to do anything that was uncalled for!”

Senoa fell back, dumbfounded, as Rain pressed on,

“For starters, why did you gather up all of the castle’s soldiers in on place? You need to keep at least a few troops behind to hold down fort! Don’t you even know that?!”

“But, however.....”

“Stop trying to make up excuses! Send everyone back inside the castle right now!”

“Now, now, General,”

Leni said as he tried to pacify Rain while trying to hold him back with both hands. In return, Rain turned on Leni and declared,

“.....Leni. I’ll be docking half of your pay next month for negligence of supervision.”

“Wha-! That’s so cruel! I really did try to stop her!”

Leni responded on the verge of tears.

Rain began to walk away as if he was done with the matter and said,

“Well, I’ll let you off the hook, then. In return, get me in contact with Gunther as soon as possible. I have something to discuss with him.”

“I, I’ll get in contact with him at once!”

Leni put a hand against his chest as he sighed in relief.

He then turned around and headed off, while Yuri jogged after Rain as he walked away with Kris in tow.

At a glance, it seemed as if the matter was over.

However, that was not the reality of the situation.

“Please wait a moment!”

Senoa cried out.

“What is it? I want to hurry up and sleep in my room already.”

“I’ll admit that I’ve overstepped my boundaries.”

Senoa ignored Rain, who began to grumble as he turned back around to face her, and said,

“But we’re about to march out against Zarmine forces soon anyway, are we not? In that case, I believe it would make no sense to disband the army.”

Ugh, here we go.

Rain shook his head in good grief.

He couldn’t possibly keep quiet about his house arrest, especially since Senoa was one of his aides. To begin with, he would soon be found out even if he kept quiet about it anyway.

There was nothing else he could do, so Rain explained the situation in the lightest tone possible. Leni, whom he had known for a long time, wouldn’t really care, so Senoa was the only problem.

“.....Ah~, about that. His Majesty apparently seems to have gotten angry after I voiced my opinion against the war. And lo and behold, I’ve been put under house arrest, haha! Oops. Hahaha!”

After explaining the situation in the simplest terms he could, he scratched the back of his head with a corny smile on his face.

In return, Senoa glared at Rain with a frosty death-mask-like expression.

“.....What did you say?”

She growled in a scarily low voice.

“Like I said, I’m under house arrest. House. Arrest. I’ve been told to stay at my castle and reflect on my actions. Well, that’s the gist of it, so I’ll be returning to my room.”

Sensing the danger in Senoa’s expression, Rain hurriedly turned around. He had simply chosen to run away, but a blood curling wail erupted from behind him before he could get too far.

Needless to say, it was Senoa.

After turning around again out of surprise, Rain found Senoa clutching her head with both hands and trembling violently while screaming. The shrill of her voice almost made him wonder if she had finally lost her mind.

A loud “higyaaaaaaaaaaaaa--” filled the area.

“H, hey there.....”

Even Rain could not hold back his surprise. It was downright eerie.

Yuri and Leni, who had still been close by, drew closer to him.

“General, isn’t this a little worse than usual?”

“Eh, does she always scream like that, Captain Leni?”

“Well, yeah. But it’s not usually this bad.”

“How should I put this..... She’s quite the individual.”

“You’ve got that right,” Leni nodded as they turned to face Rain.

“W, what do you want? I did nothing wrong.”

The wailing suddenly stopped the moment that Rain made his pathetic excuse.

Everyone gulped as they watched over Senoa.

Senoa absentmindedly sank down to the floor as if she had suddenly found her mind at peace.

Before long, an eerie laugh began to seep out of her mouth. And as she laughed, she began to remove her armor piece after piece. In other words, she was taking off her armor.

“Th, this is starting to get dangerous, General. Wouldn’t it be better if you just apologized already……?”

Leni gulped.

In contrast, Yuri was observing Senoa with great interest.

“Uh-Huh. It really is pretty bad this time. Hey Leni, go and apologize to her for me.”

“Surely you jest! I don’t have the courage for that.”

“Right, okay. Then Yuri, you go.”

“What?! Like hell I’ll go…… I mean, I don’t want to go either, sir! In her will, my late grandmother told me not to stick my head into dangerous situations!”

“Hey, what’s with this nonsense about your dead grandmother’s will?! You should think a little more before you speak!”

Leni repeatedly glanced at Senoa’s as he said,

“General, aren’t you always telling me that you’re not afraid of anything? This is your time to shine, sir.”

“Even if I’m not scared of anything, there are things that I’d bad at dealing with! Like women who nag all the time, for example, or women who can’t do housework, or lastly, women who laugh while taking off their armor all of the sudden!”

“……Not that it matters, but all of those involve women, General.”

“That’s why you should go!”

While Rain and Leni were arguing about who should go, Senoa continued to remove her armor piece after piece and abruptly stopped laughing when she had finally finished.

Then, she stood up slowly with a sword in hand.

Placing a hand on its hilt, she unsheathed her longsword in one smooth movement. The soldiers who had been watching the situation from the plaza with bated breath finally began to stir.

“Ooh! The Captain has snapped!”

“Hey, hold on a sec!”

Leni said as he stiffened up.

“This is getting really bad, General!”

He continued shakily as he panicked and began to draw back in a hurry, saying,

“I, I’ve got nothing to do with this; I really don’t, right, Miss Senoa?”

“Leni, why you.....”

Rain wanted to ask, *what a heartless subordinate! Don’t you agree?* but Yuri had already dashed to safety before he could. She was watching on excitedly from a safe distance away.

“Are these really the only kinds of people I have around me.....?”

Senoa advanced slowly but steadily with sword in hand as Rain lamented. There was a deadly glint to her eyes.

“General.....”

“Wha, what is it?”

"I am utterly disgusted with you. To think that a high general such as yourself would brazenly speak out against the war and get put under house arrest!"

"No, it's just that I had my own plans."

"However, your disgrace is also my disgrace as your aide, General."

She wasn't listening at all.

"Let us both gallantly take responsibility together."

She appeared to be dead serious.

Well, it is my fault, but..... Oh man. Even still, it's not like I can afford to die just yet,

Rain thought just as Senoa raised her sword. He wanted to run away, but his pride wouldn't allow it.

For the time being, he decided to try to pacify her with a friendly attitude.

"Well, calm down a bit, Senoa. I'll just go ahead and say this, but the real fight with Zarmine will start soon. For now, we should prepare for the upcoming fight by quietly kindling our fighting spirits, and-- you're not listening at all!"

"Prepare yourself!"

With a loud shriek, Senoa swung down her sword with all of her might and very nearly grazed Rain.

Her sword plunged deep into the earth.

"H, hey, that was dangerous! What would you have done if that had hit! That wouldn't have been funny!"

"General....."

Senoa said as she brandished her sword once more with her eyes open wide.

“I will apologize for my impoliteness today along the road to Hades. Now come, we shall go gallantly!”

“Ugh, you really aren’t listening. And I’m not going anywhere!”

Senoa was completely engrossed in her own world. It was questionable whether she had even heard Rain’s coaxing to begin with.

I guess it can’t be helped.

Left with no other choice, Rain placed a hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Prepare yourself this time!”

“Oh geez, I guess it can’t be helped.”

Senoa swung down her sword yet again.

At that moment--

Rain’s magic sword drew a trail of light through the sky at the speed of lightning, easily deflecting Senoa’s attack.

Senoa’s sword flashed silver as it spun surprisingly far away and thrust deep into the earth when it landed.

“Ah!”

Senoa stared blankly at her sword.

“Hmph.”

Rain brushed back his hair in pointless grandiosity and re-sheathed his sword. He continued,

“There’s no way that an amateur who only picked up the sword just recently could ever possibly cut down a genius like me!Hey what’s wrong? Are you playing dumb again?”

Senoa stood still with her mouth half-open and looked like she was about to burst into tears. She looked as if her soul had been drawn out.

“Hey, hello? Are you there?”

“.....Ty, please.”

“Huh? What did you say?”

When Rain leaned in because he could not understand what Senoa had said, she suddenly grabbed him by the collar and shook him violently.

“Take responsibility, please!”

“Whoa! Hey, let me go; calm down!”

“This was supposed to be my maiden battle, but you, but youu---!”

Senoa cried, practically into his ear.

As Senoa shook him back and forth, Rain could swear that he heard Yuri cracking up from far away.

Chapter 2 - Ralphus' Battle

The drizzle that had fallen since midnight had finally let up just before noon. It was a welcome change in the weather. After all, it was almost winter, and nobody wanted to freeze in the rain.

Ralphus looked down at his men from atop his horse and gently shook his head.

It wasn't too strange considering that they were marching towards war, but nobody seemed to be talking. Even still, Ralphus felt that it was too quiet.

All of his men were looking at the ground as they traveled the road by horse, as if they were about to be crushed by the uncertainty of the future to come.

It was understandable..... The enemy they were about to fight was Zarmine, after all. No one would be excited at the prospect of fighting a battle they couldn't win. Even the most honorable of knights would want to return alive from the battlefield. Nobody in their right mind would wish for anything less.

The weight of his men's lives weighed heavily on Ralphus' chest.

They were in the land that had once been Lunan, which had been destroyed by Zarmine half a year ago..... The narrow road they traveled passed through a remote forest.

Ralphus had accompanied the King and had passed the border several days ago, but he was now marching on with only his own unit.

The reason was simple -he had been left behind by the King.

That morning, he had awoken to find, to his great displeasure, that King Douglass and the other High Generals had already left with their

troops in tow.

It appeared that Ralphus was considerably disliked by the King. It was most likely because he had covered for Rain.

He had thought that it was strange that his unit had been sent to camp so far away from the rest of the army, but he had never thought that they would be left behind right in the middle of an enemy nation.

Ralphus did not regret his earlier actions in the least, but his feelings regarding the king's lack of magnanimity had crossed beyond disappointment and into the verge of despair.

He could not believe that the King had the nerve to do something like this for petty revenge.

After all, it would only serve to put the army at a greater disadvantage if a battle were to suddenly break out.

.....Stop right there. Thinking about it won't solve anything. I'll just have to make the most of the situation.

After deciding to change his mindset, he called out to his men in a loud voice.

It was imperative that they caught up with the King as quickly as possible, but it was also necessary to rest.

“Attention! All units, we will take a short break before moving on! You are permitted to eat a light meal if you'd like.”

Ralphus heard his men regain some of their cheer as they dismounted and began to take their breaks as they pleased.

A loud voice called out to him from behind as he looked over his troops.

“Boss! What are ya doin’?! When ya take a break, ya gotta do it

properly!”

A giant of a man who was large in both size and stature rode up next to Ralphus.

He was a heavily bearded and looked every bit like a rough mountain bandit. He had a deep, throaty voice and a thick mane of disheveled hair.

His name was Gwen, and he had been Ralphus’ aide ever since the latter had first ventured out onto the battlefield at the tender age of fifteen. He was already in his mid-thirties.

“No, I have to.....”

“C’mon, let’s go rest over there. I’ll go with ya!”

“--Alright, Gwen,”

Ralphus said with a wry smile as he dismounted.

Gwen was a good-natured man, but he was stubborn and refused to back down when he wanted something done. It was more sensible than not to play along with his ideas.

In addition, Gwen always called Ralphus ‘Boss’ for some reason, and had been doing so for the past ten years. When corrected, he would call Ralphus by the correct title of ‘General’ for a while, but would soon return to saying ‘Boss’ again. Ralphus had long since decided to drop the matter and no longer minded being called ‘Boss’.

After all, Gwen did not hold the slightest bit of ill intent against him.

Together, they walked away from the rest of the unit and sat down with their backs against a tree.

“Tch. The ground’s all moist. My butt’s gonna get wet,”

Gwen complained with a heavy scowl.

“It’s something you can feel only because you’re alive,”

Ralphus accidentally let slip out. He only realized what he had done when Gwen asked,

“Do ya really think we might be in some serious trouble this time, Boss? The enemy’s a bit tough, after all.”

“No--”

Ralphus had intended to play it down, but then reconsidered. There was no point in hiding it from Gwen. He corrected himself, saying,

“I’m afraid I do. I can’t deny that Zarmine is absurdly powerful.”

“I agree with ya there. We were only able to scrape together fifteen-thousand men, but they’ve got forty to fifty-thousand just in their expeditionary force, right?”

“Yeah. At least that’s what our intel says. Their commander was..... General Garblake, I believe?”

And Garblake’s aide’s name should have been Luminas, or something of the sort.

Ralphus recalled their names in a composed manner. Garblake was a veteran general who had distinguished himself on the battlefield in countless wars, and Luminas appeared to be a man with many schemes up his sleeves who fought with brains rather than brawn. However, Ralphus could not be certain because he did not have enough information since this was the first time that Zarmine and Sunkwoll had gone to war.

However, they were talking about the absolutely meritocratic kingdom of Zarmine. There was no doubt that Garblake and Luminas could not be underestimated.

“Well, we can’t do nothin’ about the difference in our military might, but rather than that, there’s somethin’ else that doesn’t sit too

right with me.”

Gwen stared intently at Ralphus with his gigantic eyes. Then, for some reason, he proceeded to scowl magnificently.

“It’s not like you to be so indirect about something. What’s upsetting you?”

Ralphus asked gently. Gwen answered immediately, as if he had been waiting for permission to continue.

“It’s Boss Rain, of course!”

“Rain?”

“Exactly! He’s technically yer friend, Boss, ain’t he? But he just ran away, and that doesn’t sit too right with me. He left all alone, when things are gettin’ so dangerous--. It’s as if he’s just gone and abandoned ya, Boss!”

“Rain, huh? I wonder what he’s been up to?”

Ralphus thought about his best friend back home in Sunkwoll and smiled. Rain should have returned to his own lands at least ten days ago, and was probably being pestered by the beautiful blond Senoa every day.

Ralphus had also sent Rain a letter asking him to take Princess Shelfa under his care, but did not know if it had reached him yet.

“What are ya thinking about? I’m incredibly angry here!”

“Getting angry with me won’t solve anything.”

“That’s true, but..... gah, yer too nice for yer own good, Boss. Aren’t ya even a little angry?!”

Talking about the matter seemed to have agitated Gwen even more, as he suddenly drew closer to Ralphus while looking like he was about to pop a vein.

Although he was a little apologetic to admit it, Ralphus thought that Gwen looked like a child who had been crying through the night. Then again, Ralphus had always thought that Gwen was very expressive.

Oblivious to Ralphus' feeling, Gwen complained,

"Ya know, when all things are said and done, I do respect that guy a little. After all, he's helped ya out a couple of times, Boss. I thought he'd at least help ya out this time, too, even if he abandoned everyone else. Geez, what a mess!"

".....Even if you put it that way, I don't feel as though I've been betrayed by Rain."

"What are ya sayin' after all this time..... If this ain't betrayal, I dunno what is. How else would ya explain his behavior?"

Ralphus shrugged, unable to offer a response.

He had every confidence that Rain was not the type of person to betray his friends. However, it was difficult to convey that confidence to others. He didn't know how to take the convictions from the depths of his heart and turn them into words.

Still, Ralphus thought that Gwen needed to give Rain more credit, since he too had been saved by Rain before.

Well, Rain wasn't acting the way he normally does, either--wait.

Something caught Ralphus' attention as he was thinking.

To begin with, why did Rain go out of his way to get put under house arrest, despite the dangers of doing so? If he had really wanted to run away, there were better ways to do it. Is there some other reason behind his actions? A reason that I haven't thought of yet?

A flash of inspiration struck Ralphus as he thought.

“I see! That guy...!”

Ralphus began to explain his revelation with great zeal, as Gwen’s eyes opened wide in shock, saying,

“I’ve figured it out. I know why Rain wanted to be put under house arrest.”

“.....What are ya gettin’ at?”

“Basically, it’s like this. What would happen if Rain had sortied with us?”

“Well, then he’d be fightin’ with us.”

“That’s not it, you’ve missed the point.”

Ralphus shook his head fervently before continuing,

“If Rain had sortied with us, he would just die with us in the upcoming battle. If he died, he wouldn’t be able to fulfill his objective.”

“Hold it, Boss..... Ya can’t say stuff like that!”

Gwen looked around to make sure that no one else had heard them. Ralphus essentially declared that they would lose the battle, and that was not something a general should say to his men.

“This isn’t like ya, Boss. So, what’s his objective, then?”

“Needless to say, it’s to save us,”

Ralphus declared with confidence.

“Had he followed orders and joined our expeditionary forces, even he wouldn’t be free to act as he’d like, no? He would be bound by His Majesty’s orders, and would ultimately die with the rest of us. That’s why he got himself put under house arrest on purpose. This way, he’s free to act as he needs in order to save us. And that’s the truth.”

Of this, Ralphus had no doubt.

However, he knew that His Majesty would not be one of the people who Rain was trying to save.

Gwen stared in unfiltered skepticism as Ralphus burst with confidence. In his doubt, Gwen had the face of a greedy loan shark lending money to a poor debtor.

“.....Well, if that’s how things are, he’d better do his damned best job. After all, he’s always goin’ on about how he’s a genius and whatnot.”

Gwen, who still clearly did not have any faith in Rain, turned his gaze to the rest of the army. He did not seem to have believed Ralphus’ explanation at all.

“He’ll do something without fail. And Gwen, you seem to doubt him quite a bit, but Rain is every bit the genius that he claims to be. For some reason, though, I don’t think he believes it himself.”

“That, that’s not even funny!”

Gwen said, gawking in surprise. He continued,

“He stops to call himself a genius every ten steps, ya know?”

“Gwen, you’re exaggerating. Well, I guess I can’t deny that he says it fairly often. It’s just that I feel as if what he says and how he actually feels about the matter are two different things.”

“Did he say somethin’ about it?”

Gwen asked in a whisper as Ralphus responded with a lonely smile.

“Of course not. He’s not someone who’d readily open up his heart for the world to see. It’s just what I feel about the matter.”

Unable to quell Gwen’s doubts any further, Ralphus stood up as he saw his other aide approach them.

“Did something happen, Nigel?”

Nigel was an aide with considerable military experience, but he did not look like a knight at all.

His hair, which must have been washed in the morning, glistened in the sunlight, and he stared at Ralphus silently with girlishly large green eyes.

His effeminate face was the very picture of composure.

Yet, there was no way that this silent and solitary youth had come over simply to chat, so a situation that he had felt the need to report to his superior officer must have arisen. Ralphus had a bad feeling about it.

“Reporting, Sir.”

After greeting Ralphus with a salute that was perfect in every sense of the word, Nigel continued as if he was simply talking about the weather.

“The scouts have not returned, although the appointed time has passed.”

Ralphus met Gwen’s gaze.

Ralphus always sent out scouts before advancing through enemy territory. The fact that they had not returned was not a simple matter.

“Oi! Do ya mean that not a single one of ‘em came back?!”

Nigel nodded silently.

Nigel looked unconcerned, but this was not a turn of events that Ralphus could afford to ignore. It was generally assumed that scouts had been killed by the enemy if they did not return.

Of course, in this case, the enemy in question was none other than

Zarmine.

Evidently, the enemy had grasped their movements long ago.

Well, we should have expected the obvious, Ralphus thought as he bit down on his lips. Even if Zarmine had only acquired the territory just recently, it was reasonable to expect that they would suspect any strange forces that had been moving about in their lands for days. There was no point in saying it out loud, but this plan had been a failure from the very start.

“.....Boss, ain’t this pretty bad?”

“Yeah. We were planning to ambush the enemy, but it seems like we’re the ones getting ambushed instead. I’m worried about His Majesty. We must catch up to him at once!”

But right as Ralphus finished talking--

The faint sound of countless people bellowing from afar echoed into his ears.

Along with it, he heard the distinct clang of metal clashing against metal.

“Damn! It seems that we’re too late!”

Ralphus said as he broke out into a run with his armor clanking after him. His two aides followed him not too far behind.

The three of them cut through the crowd of discomposed soldiers and jumped atop their horses. Then, Ralphus addressed his men, shouting,

“Listen up! Bad news, but it seems that the enemy has made the first move. What we’re hearing is most likely the sound of His Majesty’s troops, who departed before us, battling the enemy! We must go to their aide at once!”

The army fell as silent as death and listened intently, as if the commotion from just before had never happened. All of their eyes and ears were trained on Ralphus.

After making sure that everyone --or at least everyone who was ranked knight-captain and above-- understood the gravity of the situation, Ralphus commanded,

“All right! Then, we will begin to advance in formation as quickly as we can. Form ranks as soon as you reach the battlefield and await further orders. All units, move out! And quickly!”

Under Ralphus’ orders, the once-bewildered group of knights gathered their wits and began to move as one. They moved with composure and without falter.

Behind his stern demeanor, Ralphus’ voice held a tint of satisfaction as he looked to Gwen and said,

“They’re all so composed even in the face of war. I would have expected no less from these knights.”

“Nah, that ain’t quite it. It’s all because yer the one givin’ orders, Boss.”

“--? I don’t understand.”

Gwen simply shook his head and pointed forward as Ralphus knit his eyebrows in confusion.

“It’s fine if ya don’t get it. Let’s get goin’! It wouldn’t make sense for ya to be the last one to get there, Boss.”

“Y, yeah. You’re right!”

Ralphus gently spurred his horse into a spirited gallop.

He prayed that he wouldn’t be too late.

Ralphus advanced with his men for a short while. The screams and

bellows grew louder as they drew nearer.

As he was hurrying down the path, Ralphus spotted a group of knights approaching them.

He recognized a centurion among the group, so he knew that they were not enemy forces. Still, all of them had abandoned their horses and were scrambling closer on foot. Taking into consideration the fact that several of the men were injured, Ralphus concluded that they were retreating.

After stopping his horse, Ralphus called out,

“Hold! What are you doing? What happened to the battle?”

“.....Ah!”

The men had stiffened up when they first saw Ralphus’ troops, but they became visibly relieved after realizing who he was.

Gwen snorted loudly and said,

“Hey, what, yer already runnin’ for yer lives?”

“H, how dare...!”

The centurion began with indignation, but quickly lost his nerve and looked away after one look at Ralphus’ sharp eyes. He continued,

“W, we had no other choice! W, we were betrayed by our own!”

“Betrayed!?”

Ralphus asked sternly, staring hard at the other man.

The centurion gulped.

“Y, yes, sir. Lord Ganoa and Lord Gilles attacked His Majesty’s unit as soon as the enemy approached..... And they... His Majesty’s h, head.....”

The man trailed off at the end of his sentence after seeing the color drain from Ralphus' face.

After gritting his teeth together, Ralphus quietly asked,

“So you mean to say that His Majesty has passed away.”

“Y, yes, sir!”

The men took one look at Ralphus' rage and began to quiver in fear, as if they were criminals before the gallows.

“.....Ganao or Gilles -which one killed His Majesty?”

“I, I don't know. They seemed to be competing over it.”

Ralphus understood the gist of the situation.

To sum it up, although he did not know when it had happened, the two of them had accepted some sort of offer from Zarmine. Then, they had made their final decision after learning of this reckless strategy.

They had rushed at King Douglass at the critical moment when the Zarmine army had appeared. After all, the head of a king was a great token of surrender and an even better tool to buy favors with.

“Damn it!! Those dirty bastards!!”

Gwen roared as he finally came back to his senses. Nigel silently folded his arms from atop his horse, seemingly lost in thought.

“.....We should hurry,”

Ralphus said as he spurred on his horse without another word, ignoring the men who seemed to have more to say.

Heavy feelings of regret stirred within his heart as he pressed onwards.

If I had been more careful, could I have saved His Majesty? Or, have I simply been making all of the wrong choices up until now?

Ralphus could not help but blame himself, despite knowing that there was no point in brooding over the matter anymore.

“There’s the end of the forest!”

Gwen called out in a somewhat hesitantly. Ralphus spurred on his horse faster and leapt into the sunlight.

As his field of vision widened, Ralphus saw the large, black army in the distance.

The Zarmine army’s armor was fundamentally black and standard across all units, and was quite the spectacle. It looked as if the earth itself had been covered by a giant, black bullet.

Yet, only a fraction of Zarmine’s army continued fighting, pushing the Sunkwoll army to the brink annihilation. Or rather, the difference in military might was so great that the remainder of Sunkwoll’s army would either flee or be wiped out sooner rather than later.

After being swallowed up and crushed by enemy forces of 40,000 strong, Sunkwoll’s defeat was imminent.

The cluster of silver armor was being pushed back by black troops.

Moreover, as far as Ralphus could tell, the King’s personal unit of 5,000 men had already been annihilated, and only a few thousand men lead by the surviving High Generals still continued to fight.

Ralphus’ men, lined up in orderly rows behind him, stared silently at the disaster before them.

“Boss..... This is, already...”

Gwen said hesitantly.

Ralphus slowly turned away. He understood what Gwen was

saying. There was no longer a point in joining the battle. The King they were supposed to protect had fallen, and their remaining allies were already fleeing the battlefield.

Only, there was no way that the Zarmine army would simply let them leave, so if Ralphus and his men wanted to retreat, they would have to leave at once.

“I know, Gwen,”

Ralphus said, surprising even himself with how calm he was. Then, he turned to face his men and declared,

“It is unfortunate, but the outcome of this battle has already been decided. There is no longer a reason for us to join this fight.”

Ralphus’ men, still standing in formation, silently listened to his words. He continued,

“Return to your homes in Sunkwoll as fast as your horses can carry you! You don’t need to wait for my orders any more. Everyone is to return home!”

Ralphus saluted them away with a wave of his hand.

But not a single man returned his salute. His men usually followed his orders immediately, but not a single man had moved.

Irritated, Ralphus was about to repeat his order when Nigel silently came forward.

“What will you do, General?”

He asked in a deep voice.

“Me? Well, I’ll --”

Ralphus tried to think of an excuse, but quickly gave on the prospect.

He knew that he would not be able to deceive his men so easily.

“I have decided that this will be the place where I will die. So, don’t worry about me and hurry home.”

Nigel wordlessly stared back at Ralphus.

“.....What are you thinking about, Nigel?”

“I’m afraid I cannot answer. You would stop me if I did, General. In any case, I understand how you feel.”

“Your reply tells me everything I need to know! Can’t you be quiet and do as you’re told?!”

“No,”

Nigel replied bluntly.

His reply left Ralphus dumbfounded and unable to reply.

Just then, a beat-red Gwen slapped Nigel hard across the back.

Apparently having been greatly moved by Nigel’s reply, he continued to hit Nigel across the back until the latter burst into a coughing fit.

“Good fer you! That kind of attitude’s what makes a man a man! I thought ya were all about the doom n’ gloom, but yer actually a manly guy when it counts!”

“.....It doesn’t make me happy to be praised by you, Sir Gwen,”

Nigel said once he stopped coughing.

“Tch. Yer just as uncute as ever, aren’t ya?”

Gwen threw back his head and laughed heartily.

“Hey, hold on a second! This isn’t the time to be laughing, Gwen.

Nigel, you too. I'm begging you, so won't you please return home? You can still make it if you leave now."

"Ain't that enough, Boss? Anyone who doesn't wanna die will leave on their own, and anyone who wants to share yer fate ain't gonna listen no matter what ya say,"

Gwen said cheerfully as he swung around the giant battle axe that had been draped around his shoulder.

You're just talking about yourself, aren't you? Ralphus thought with a sigh.

However, Gwen wasn't alone in the sentiment.

Starting with Nigel, not a single man had moved an inch.

"I'm sorry, everyone....."

"What are ya talkin' about? Anyways, where do we start? Our enemies are all up fer grabs."

"You're right."

Ralphus recovered his composure and pointed at a group of men that stood a little way from the Zarmine army -the men who had once been their allies.

"If we're to die anyway, we might as well tie up any loose ends first."

Gilles, who had betrayed Sunkwooll, was very uncharacteristically standing at the frontlines despite the fact that the battle was still going on.

Of course, he had his reasons.

Since Ganoa had already taken the best war prize, Douglass' head, he had to prove his fidelity to Zarmine by taking as many of his former allies' heads as possible now that their army was in chaos.

The fact that he had waited until the last moment possible before acting on his pledge to betray Sunkwoll had now come back to bite him where it hurt.

Well, his former allies had already been routed out for the most part, so the frontlines were quite safe anyways.

Or at least, that was what Gilles thought.

--That idiot Ganoa. He retreated immediately after taking the King's head. Doesn't he know that this is the perfect chance to curry more favor with Zarmine?

Gilles contemplated his future plans at leisure as his fat figure swayed on his horse.

Zarmine had sent him a secret message saying that they would reward him with lands several times larger than the territory he currently owned. With that much wealth, he could even build himself a new castle.

He had always thought that his current castle was much too small for him.

He would also need more concubines. He had to order his men to find him the most beautiful women.

The image of Princess Shelfa's exquisite beauty came into Gilles' mind. Could he possibly make that beauty his? Well, it wouldn't be impossible. That girl was no longer a flower too far out of his reach.

As Gilles smirked while imagining himself having his way with the delicate princess, one of his aides approached him on horseback. His face was deathly pale.

"General! There's trouble! The enemy... it's the enemy!"

"The enemy? What on earth are you talking about? They've already been almost wiped out by now!"

“It’s a different enemy!”

His face was filled with agitation and a tint of fear as his continued,

“It’s General Ralphus’ troops..... They’re heading straight for us! They’ll be here at any moment now!”

“What?!”

Gilles turned his head and looked ahead in a panic.

Indeed, a small unit was kicking up a large cloud of dust as they rushed towards him with great vigor. The lion insignia on their banners undoubtedly belonged to Ralphus.

“Im, impossible.....”

Gilles’ fat frame trembled as he let out a whimper.

It was not that he had failed to notice Ralphus’ arrival. However, he had never in his wildest dreams imagined that Ralphus would join the battle after everything that had happened.

The outcome of the battle had long since been decided, and he had thought that there was no way someone as skilled in the art of war as Ralphus would charge into the fray when the Sunkwoll army was on its last legs. Even if Ralphus was loyal to Sunkwoll, Gilles had thought that he would withdraw and re-group in preparation for another battle.

--This was a huge miscalculation on Gilles’ part, especially considering that he had always lived according to the rules of profit and loss.

Ralphus’ moral standards were something that he could never understand even if he tried.

“What do we do, General?”

Gilles’ aide asked the same question that Gilles had wanted to ask

himself.

“B, brace yourselves, for the time being. The Zarmine army will come to help us soon!”

The first wave hit as Gilles barked out the first thing that popped into his head.

The enemy’s vanguard cut through Gilles’ men like a sharp drill.

Hardly any of Gilles’ men had the will to fight.

Not only were they weighed down by the guilt of knowing that they had betrayed their comrades, but they also held an unshakeable fear for Ralpus himself. After all, his feats of bravery were renown amongst Sunkwoll’s knights.

Gilles, who commanded the weak-willed army, was no exception. He was a man filled with self-confidence, but he had never once thought that he could ever defeat Ralpus.

Sure enough, Ralpus’ army, spearheaded by the man himself, broke through Gilles’ vanguard in an instant. Gilles gulped.

Such power..... There’s no way I’ll win. Zarmine... why won’t they come to help!! At the brink of tears, he stole a glance at the Zarmine army behind him and to his dismay he found that they had already withdrawn, despite being not too far away. They had not taken a single step from their formation.

They were simply observing the situation with a tranquility that was almost offensive.

“Damnit, just what the hell is going on?!”

A cold sweat ran down Gilles’ back as he turned around to complain to his aide only to find that the latter had long since disappeared.

He abandoned me!

Gilles began to tremble. To make matters worse, his other officers and men, realizing that they could not possibly win, had also turned tail and fled on their horses.

From the start, none of Gilles' men had truly followed him out of respect, and when push came to shove, they abandoned their nasty bully of a commander all too easily.

“A, ah.....”

Succumbing to fear himself, Gilles pulled hard at his reins in an attempt to flee.

Being unused to such rough treatment, his horse bucked and threw its rider off with a whinny.

“Uwa!”

Gilles shouted as he tumbled to the ground and landed hard on his back.

Unfortunately, everyone in his immediately vicinity had already fled, and Ralphus had seen the entire exchange.

Gilles' and Ralphus' eyes met, as if an invisible line had been drawn between them.

“Gilles! Stay right where you are!!”

The normally quiet Ralphus roared in a thunderous voice.

“Eek!!”

Feeling as if his soul would leap out of his body, Gilles attempted to crawl away to safety but found, to his dismay, that his horse had long since galloped away.

“Is, is there no one here?!”

When no one answered his calls, Gilles scrambled to his feet only to find Ralphus standing tacitly before him.

He stared Gilles down with a stern face as his two commoner aides stood behind him.

“A, ah.....!”

Gilles gulped.

Without taking his eyes off of Gilles’ face, Ralphus quietly asked,

“Was it you who struck down His Majesty, Gilles?”

“No, never! The one, who, the one who killed him was Ganoa! It wasn’t me!”

“.....I see. In that case, I will send him to Hades after you..... Now, prepare yourself, Gilles!”

Ralphus drew his sword and took his stance.

With a piercing gaze and a stance that left no openings--Ralphus was the very picture of overwhelming force.

Gilles had always thought of Ralphus as a quiet guy who was too kind for his own good. But now, as his entire body trembled with fear, he realized-

That up until now he had only known a mere fraction of the man standing before him.

This isn’t even funny! As if I could beat this guy! If anyone could, it’d be that monster, Rain!

“Wa, wait. There’s no need for you to take this so seriously. Right? Sunkwool is just as good as gone. Even you’ll have to think about how you’ll act once she falls, right?”

Gilles laughed weakly as he slowly straightened himself in a

manner that would cause no alarm.

Ralphus simply knit his eyebrows in response.

Then, he changed his stance and thrust his sword against the tip of Gilles' nose.

"Gilles. How about you take up your sword like a knight in your final moments?"

Gilles shuddered after peering into Ralphus' eyes.

He's serious! He's seriously going to--

"My, my reward! I'll give you everything that I was supposed to receive! So, so please, spare me!"

"That's unsightly, Gilles!"

Ralphus brandished his sword.

Screaming his throat out, Gilles turned tail and tried to run away.

"You fool!" was the last this he heard as he felt his back burn up in white-hot pain and lost consciousness forever.

"If possible, I hadn't wanted to cut you down from behind,"

Ralphus said, shaking his head as he looked down at Gilles' corpse sprawled out in front of him.

After removing the blood off of his sword with one smooth swing, he returned it to its scabbard.

"It couldn't a' been helped. He tried to run away like the stubborn idiot he was. He got what he deserved,"

Gwen stated resolutely, spitting on the ground.

He didn't appear to hold any sympathy for Gilles, who had been

unsightly until the very end. Nigel, who was staring down at Gilles with cold eyes, likely shared the sentiment.

“On another note, Boss. Zarmine didn’t come to help this worthless bastard at all. What’s the deal with that?”

Ralphus replied in a quiet tone,

“It’s not really that strange. From their point of view, two nuisances were simply finishing each other off. It’s a nice way to get things done without having to lift a finger, no?”

“--Makes sense. So, they’d been planin’ on abandoning Gilles from the start. They used him and threw him away..... tch, it doesn’t sit right with me.”

Gwen spat on the ground again.

He was a cleanly person by nature, despite what his appearance may suggest, so he must have been extremely upset.

Ralphus wasn’t too happy either, but he pushed his feelings aside.

He turned around and searched for Ganoa within the droves of Zarmine’s large army.

However, he could not find Ganoa’s insignia anywhere, perhaps because the latter had moved far back to the rear of the army.

As Ralphus persisted in his search regardless, he heard something akin to a high-pitched whistle.

There was no need to guess what it had signaled. The Dark Army, renown throughout the continent, caused the earth to tremble as they began to move. Naturally, they moved to destroy Ralphus and his unit.

After all, the other units had already been wiped out or had fled the scene.

“It seems like we’ll have to give up on Ganoa.”

“--That it does,”

Gwen calmly concurred.

Nigel simply watched the oncoming army without any sign of distress.

.....But, in any case, Ralphus wanted for the two of them to survive.

“Gwen, Nigel, you two should--”

“Yer fallin’ on deaf ears, Boss.”

“We’ve already made up our minds,”

They said together as soon as Ralphus had opened his mouth.

“.....Is that so?”

Even Ralphus was unable to keep insisting otherwise.

They had already decided that they would share his fate no matter what. They would not back down even if he ordered them to do so.

After taking another look at his loyal aides, Ralphus turned to the rest of his unit waiting behind him. Then, he nimbly mounted his favorite steed and took up a pike.

“Then, there is nothing more to say! Let us show the enemy just how stubborn we can be!”

“Yeah!!”

With the cheer of his two-thousand men behind him, Ralphus shot out like an arrow.

He charged straight for the heart of the looming enemy army.

The enemy vanguard grew steadily closer. Before making contact, Ralphus stopped his horse and bellowed,

“My name is Ralphus Juliard Sunkwoll! Anyone who wishes to fight me, come forth!!”

The Zarmine knights were momentarily taken aback, but they soon swarmed at once to take their fearless enemy’s head.

“What a surprise. A man by the name of Ralphus has apparently challenged us to battle,”

Muttered Luminas, one of the commanding officers of the Zarmine army.

He was a military man of about thirty with a sharp chin and smooth skin. The black armor he donned did not really suit him. He gazed at his enemy before him with attentive eyes.

The man called Ralphus was, of all things, leading a pitifully small force against them. Luminas was honestly exasperated, but at the same time, he could not help but admire the man a little.

“Hmph. Now that’s what I call a true knight. You couldn’t even compare him to the likes of Ganoa or Gilles, who crossed over to our side so easily. By the way, is that man royalty? He called himself Sunkwoll just now,”

Said a heroic man with a bulky, muscular build as he stroked his long beard. His stern visage, adorned by short-trimmed golden hair, looked as if it had been chiseled from stone. He was much older than Luminas.

He was the highest commander of the entire expeditionary force, Garblake.

“No. This man, Ralphus, was granted use of the name Sunkwoll for his military exploits..... I wish that someone like him had become our ally,”

Luminas replied, knowing fully well that he wished for the impossible.

He had already known from prior research that Ralphus was passionately loyal man. If he was someone who could be swayed by land or riches, they would have already welcomed him to their side.

Most men could be enticed by promises of profit. However, there also existed men who could not be swayed from their convictions.

“It’s impossible to pull him over to our side at this point..... then what should we do?”

Garblake asked, disappointed.

Naturally, Luminas, the army’s strategist, had an answer prepared.

The enemy had already engaged their vanguard. The ensuing fight would not be a very long one.

“We defeat him, of course. If we cannot make him our ally, then he is simply another enemy.”

“I guess that’s the only thing we can do.”

“Yes,”

Luminas responded curtly.

No matter how great of a tactician Ralphus was, he could not possibly overcome the fact that he was recklessly charging at an army with tens of thousands more soldiers than his on a flat plain with no obstacles to hide behind. The staggering difference in numbers alone would determine the outcome of the battle.

If a large army clashed with a small force a hundred times, the army would win a hundred times. That was the absolute truth of war.



And yet..... Something still bothered him.

And that something was none other than Rain.

In truth, the Sunkwoll high general that Luminas was the wariest of was Rain, the “Unknown Genius”.

Intel from multiple spies had confirmed that Rain was currently under house arrest. The reason behind it seemed to have had been his opposition to the surprise attack that had been advocated by the war counsel.

It simply meant that Rain wasn't foolish enough to fight a poorly planned out war, but Luminas could not help but wonder if Rain was the type of man to abandon his friends.

According to his reports, Rain and Ralphus were quite close.....

That was the issue that bothered Luminas. To put it simply, he thought that Rain might have planted a trap somewhere.

But, if there really was trap, then how would that explain Ralphus' rash actions? They had put Ralphus', the commanding officer's, life on the line.

--So, did Rain not tell Ralphus about his plan? Am I overthinking this?

As Luminas was lost deep in thought when Garblake interjected,

“Is there something bothering you?”

“Well..... no, but I was a little worried about Ralphus' fellow general, Rain.”

Luminas outlined the gist of his concerns.

“--And so, I'm afraid that he might try to interfere.”

“Hmm. Now that you mention it, His Majesty had also warned us

about Rain. But he should be in his own castle at the moment. And even if our intel was wrong and he comes here with reinforcements, he won't be a match for our army."

".....That man is dangerous. I'd rather not underestimate him,"

Luminas insisted cautiously, even knowing that he was dangerously close to openly defying his superior.

He had more than enough reasons to be guarded against Rain. However, he decided that it was not a good idea to tell Garblake at the moment.

In any case, Garblake was indifferent to Luminas' objections.

Garblake snorted and gave Luminas a sidelong glance, as if he had been offended somehow.

And without a moment's complaint, he complained,

"I don't give a damn about Rain. And, Luminas, what are you doing? Our frontlines are beginning to give way. Hurry up and give the order. We have more than enough reserves to spare."

Luminas started at Garblake's voice and confirmed the situation.

Ralphus' unit cut through the frontlines by strategically exchanging members of their vanguard and rear guard in a dizzying manner. It was quite the feat from such a small unit. But, however, it was not enough to turn the tides of battle.

They charged forward like madmen, but even so they could not make up for their lack of numbers.

"Our hands are tied. He was a man who deserved far better, but it's about time that we finished up here."

Luminas called for a messenger and ordered five-thousand soldiers to be split into two groups and deployed to flank Ralphus' unit from

both sides. This was the end.

The unit that had received those orders rallied and began to move out. Luminas and Garblake followed them with their eyes.

--However...

“Hm?”

Luminas squinted.

His field of vision had suddenly blurred for some reason.

As Luminas began to wonder what the blurriness was, it changed into a thick, white mist at once.

“What?!”

Garblake seemed to have noticed as well.

The forest in the distance, the unit that had just been dispatched--, they were both dissolving into the mist. And the mist continued to grow thicker and thicker.

“What the..., is this mist?”

“No, this is..... shit! Is this magic?!”

The pure white mist that surrounded Luminas had already begun to obscure both friend and foe alike. In a panic, Luminas called the messenger back and retracted his previous order.

At this rate, they risked attacking their own men.

“What is going on, Luminas?!”

“It’s probably the enemy’s magic. I think that multiple enemy mages are creating this mist with magic.”

“What?!”

You've one-upped us, Rain.

Luminas sighed. Only Rain would have intervened here and now. It seemed that he had never intended on abandoning Ralphus after all.

Rain must have dispatched his men because, according to the Magic Vision that the lookouts were using, he had not moved from his castle.

He had just been outwitted, but Luminas was not very upset about it for some reason.

“Luminas, we can't act freely at this rate.....”

“Indeed. We cannot risk having our men attack each other by mistake. I'll have a few men sent out to search for the mages creating the mist,”

Said Luminas as he added, *though it'll be impossible to find such a small number of people in this situation*, to himself.

They had no choice but to wait for the mist to clear.

--You've won this round. But Rain, you can't win a war if you're always running away. We will still be victorious in the end.

Luminas crossed his arms as he sat atop his horse and stoically waited for the mist to clear.

Ralphus, who had been engrossed in battle, finally stopped his horse when the heavy mist around him rendered it impossible to fight any longer.

The Zarmine army was retreating in order to prevent accidental infighting.

“.....We were spared by the skin of our teeth, Boss,”

Said Gwen with a sigh as he guided his horse closer.

His armor was covered in dents and cracks, telling the silent story of his participation in the battle. Nigel, who waited silently behind him, fared no better.

“Gwen, you’re hurt!”

Ralphus tried to dismount in a panic after seeing blood ooze out from a hole in Gwen’s leg armor.

Gwen stopped him with a single hand.

“This is nothin’, Boss. It didn’t get to the bone. And Boss, ain’t yer stomach hurting yerself?”

“.....This is just a scratch.”

Ralphus brushed his wound aside as if it was nothing. It was definitely more than a scratch, but it was certainly not enough to threaten his life.

“But still, this mist couldn’t a’ had better timin’. This here’s a miracle, Boss.”

“Gwen, miracles don’t come so cheap. This is Rain’s doing. Or one of his men’s.”

“Naw, no way. Yer overthinkin’ this.”

“.....Someone is coming,”

Nigel quietly interjected.

Indeed, they could hear the sound of hooves approaching them. They seemed to belong to a single horseman.

“An enemy?!”

Gwen readied his battle axe without a moment’s delay. Nigel tightened his grip on his spear as well.

But Ralphus, who had a hunch about who it might be, did not move.

“Both of you, lower your weapons. It’s alright, it’s probably...”

Before he could finish, a man riding a black horse emerged from the thick fog.

“Sir Ralphus, I presume?”

The man stopped his horse and stared intently at Ralphus.

He was rather slim, and had a delicate visage that could have been mistaken for a woman’s. He wore no armor, and instead wore only a cloak over his thick shirt.

His black hair and green eyes marked him as a Sunkwoll commoner, but his eyes were uncannily sharp. On top of that, he looked sullen, as if something grossly unpleasant was on his mind. Or, perhaps, that was simply how his face naturally rested.

“Indeed, I am Ralphus. And you are?”

The man gave a half-hearted bow upon Ralphus’ response.

“My apologies. I am called Gunther Valoa. Under orders from my master, Lord Rain, I have come to meet you, Lord Ralphus,”

Gunther replied morosely.

“As I’d thought.”

Ralphus sighed as he glanced sideways at Gwen, whose mouth was open wide in surprise. He continued,

“Is he here too?”

“No, Lord Rain had originally intended to meet you himself, but I convinced him otherwise. It was easier to keep the enemy off guard if my Lord remained at Cortecreas Castle.”

“.....Is that so? But Gunther. I’d thought that I was quite familiar with Rain’s officers, but this is my first time meeting you.”

“I am the leader of the intelligence and covert operations division, whom Lord Rain has reserved especially for times like now. Putting that aside, please hurry up and escape. My subordinates are creating this fog with magic, but their magic will not last forever.”

Gunther urged Ralphus on with a hint of irritation in his voice. They probably did not have much time left.

Instead of answering, Ralphus glared silently into the mist. Gwen, Nigel, and his other men watched him without a word.

At long last, Ralphus said in anguish,

“I had hoped to die before Rain came to help. I did not intend to be forgiven for allowing His Majesty to die so easily. And even now, my feelings haven’t changed.”

“Does that mean that you intend on making this place your grave?”

Gunther asked, his face betraying no hint of emotion.

“That’s correct. I’d like you to return and pass on a message to Rain. I want him to live on and support the Princess. There’s no way that Zarmine will simply let her be. And, if possible, I’d like you to take my men with you.”

“Whoa there!”

Gwen, who had been listening silently until now, firmly interjected. He continued,

“That matter’s already been decided. We’re goin’ to follow ya wherever ya go, Boss.”

“But.....”

“In any event, I cannot pass on that message to my Lord,”

Said Gunther, interrupting the pair as they began to bicker.

“What do you mean?”

“To me, Lord Rain’s orders are absolute. I have no intention of returning to him without you. It’s not what I had wanted, but I will simply have to die along with you,”

Gunther tacitly stated without skipping a beat, as if he was commenting on local gossip.

“What?!”

Ralphus stared into his face, wondering if he was truly serious.

Gunther calmly stared back. His eyes did not waver in the slightest.

Just what kind of man was he? He didn’t appear to be a noble, but he still had a surname.

“So you’re choosing death, yes? In that case, I must entrust the rest of this mission to my men. Now, then...!”

“W, wait!”

Ralphus barely managed to stop Gunther, who had made to leave without any lingering hesitations, in the nick of time.

“Is there still something else?”

Gunther asked, thoroughly annoyed.

It was rare to find someone who cared so little about life or death. He had simply chosen to die alongside Ralphus, instead of trying to convince the latter otherwise.

A seed of doubt sprouted in Ralphus’ heart.

If things continued as they were, this man would surely die. One look at Gunther’s eyes told him that this was not a bluff.

In other words, one of Rain's trusted men would die because of him.

No, it wasn't only Gunther. Not a single one of Ralphus' men had tried to leave either.

Even despite the fact that Ralphus did not want to take anyone down with him.

What should I do?! What can be done?!

"Boss....."

"General....."

Gwen and Nigel watched over Ralphus with concern.

Gunther looked on at their exchange without a hint of emotion. Then, as if he had suddenly remembered something he had forgotten, he muttered,

"Ah, yes, I have a message from Lord Rain that I forgot to relay."

".....What is it?"

Ralphus asked, still at a loss.

Keeping his composure, Gunther replied,

"Lord Rain instructed me to tell you that a fight isn't about the fighting itself. It's about who remains standing at the end."

"Anything else?"

Ralphus asked with a wry smile. Without returning the gesture, Gunther continued,

"Now that you mention it, he also said this: 'Don't push all of your responsibilities onto me, idiot!'"

“Now that’s something he would say,”

Ralphus said as he burst out in laughter despite the situation.

Eventually, his shoulders began to shake and his laughing grew louder. He ignored the stares he was receiving from his men.

“So, what will you do? Have you changed your mind? I am in a hurry,”

Gunther asked, still obviously displeased. Deep wrinkles ran between his eyebrows. They dampened his attractive features.

With some effort, Ralphus finally stopped laughing and confidently replied,

“Yeah, I’ve changed my mind. It seems that Rain still has a plan for victory yet. I’ll bet on that.”

“.....How troublesome. You should have said that from the beginning,”

Gunther retorted sullenly.

Chapter 3 - Shelfa, Leaving Galfort Castle

Zarmine's capital city, Rheagur, was built upon the intersection of several important highways that ran throughout the continent, and was a prosperous city bustling with merchant activity.

Thus, her residents naturally enjoyed a higher standard of living compared to the citizenry of most other kingdoms, and many of them were rather wealthy.

Furthermore, Zarmine's prosperity only increased as she won battle after battle against her numerous enemy kingdoms.

At the heart of the capital city was Gaenys Castle, an old castle that King Leygur had recently renovated.

It was a large and magnificent castle.

A deep moat filled to the brim with water encircled the castle twice, and its ramparts towered over the rest of the city.

However, despite the fact that it had been recently renovated, the castle could not be called an attractive one. After all, it was not decorated in any way.

The exterior of the castle's spires was comprised of the same stones that built its foundation, and neither the castle gates nor the ramparts held any extraneous embellishment.

This was because the castle's master, King Leygur, cared little about the appearance of his castle.

Kneeling before the king in a spacious audience chamber was the prime minister, Jagil, whose voice resounded across the hall as he presented his report.

Nothing covered the floors of this expansive chamber, save for a single crimson carpet that created a path from the entrance to the throne.

The chandelier that hung from the high ceiling and the numerous candles that littered the walls provided sufficient lighting, but the chamber still gave off an unshakably dreary and cold impression.

Neither flowers nor paintings decorated the area.

It was a rather desolate place to seat the throne.

“.....According to the reports we received via Magic Vision, we have already taken King Douglass’ head. All that is left to do now is to march into Sunkwool itself. Your verdict please, Your Majesty.”

Magic Vision, one of the many spells available to mages, could send images and scenes from one person to another no matter how far apart they were.

Thanks to that spell, Jagil could receive reports about the battle in almost real time.

In this day and age, it was a luxury afforded only to kingdoms that had the resources to employ mages in actual combat.

In any case, Jagil wrapped up his report and awaited his king’s orders. Yet, King Leygur remained silent.

He waited for a little while longer, but eventually raised his head after receiving no reply.

The king, dressed in loose ceremonial robes made of sheer black silk, had his eyes closed as if he was asleep and was deep in thought.

Although his long, beautiful silver hair covered half of his face, King Leygur’s attractive features were still immediately obvious.

“Your Majesty?”

Jagil called again.

Still, Leygur remained silent.

He couldn't have actually have fallen asleep, could he?

Left with little other choice, Jagil began to rise. But--

Leygur opened his eyes at that exact moment. He gazed down at his aging retainer in earnest.

Jagil shivered, feeling as if darkness itself had peered at him through the king's black eyes.

Hurriedly, he kneeled once more.

He did not wish to provoke the king's wrath. After all, the king had succeeded the throne by overthrowing his predecessor. He could easily take Jagil's head if he so wished. Just the other day, he had effortlessly cut down the reckless rebels that had conspired against him. Each of the rebels had been capable and skilled generals in their own right.

"I heard your report, but was there no word from Garblake about Rain?"

Leygur asked in a chilly voice.

Jagil lowered his head and said,

"None. Only that they had taken the enemy king's head."

Leygur began to scowl, as if something had been to his distaste.

And again, he began to ponder.

Jagil wracked his brain. He could not fathom what his king was thinking. His king was too heavily concerned about the commoner named Rain.

For Jagil, who was born of a noble lineage, a mere commoner without pride in his blood was of little consequence.

Rather, it made more sense to him to be wary of the noble named Ralphus.

But, utterly ignoring his reprehensions, his king gravely said,

“.....Send a large group of assassins after Rain. Skilled ones.”

“Sire. Assassins..... you say?”

“Indeed. Make sure to select individuals who have proven themselves on the field. As for their number..... select at least ten or more. Meanwhile, there is no need to advance further into Sunkwoll yet.”

“Understood...”

Does he really think that that man is so important?..... Jagil’s burst of displeasure made him forget his fear of King Leygur for a moment. And so, forgetting himself, he said,

“It is true that Rain is a talented individual, Your Majesty. However, he is simply a mere commoner. Surely, he is not important enough for you to take him so seriously, Sire?”

The king did not respond immediately. But, after a little while, he muttered,

“...Are nobles really that great?”

A cold sweat ran down Jagil’s back.

He noticed his blunder. He had forgotten that King Leygur, too, had been a simple commoner who had appeared out of the blue around a decade ago.

“Please, please forgive me!”

Scared to the point that he could not keep his teeth from chattering, Jagil prostrated himself and bowed so deeply that his head touched the floor.

He heard Leygur rise from the throne.

Then, he heard the heavy sound of the king's boots draw ever closer.

Jagil thought that he could almost hear the blade of the magic sword cutting through the air to rest upon his neck.

“Your, Your Majesty! Please! I beg of you!”

Dark boots appeared right before his eyes. Unable even to muster up the courage to raise his head, Jagil simply continued groveling for forgiveness.

Some time passed. He was close to accepting his fate when he finally heard Leygur's voice.

“Jagil, you may raise your head”

Said the king.

At the same time, he heard the swish of a cloak..... the king had returned to the throne.

Have, have I truly..... been spared?

Cautiously raising his head, he found Leygur sitting on the throne as if nothing had happened.

“Jagil.”

“Y, yes!”

“You're still useful to me as a civil officer. Thus, I will forget your slip of tongue from earlier. And you will obey my commands to the letter..... understand?”

“Yes, Sire! At once!”

“Do not forget the fear that you are feeling now. I’ll warn you only once: the next time you say something so senseless, I will have your head.”

“I will not forget. Never.”

Once again, Jagil lowered his head to the cold stone floor.

“That would be for the best,”

Leygur curtly whispered to himself. He added,

“Rain, show me your power. Do not disappoint me.....”

His words were so quiet that they never reached his old retainer’s ears.

~ ~ * ~ ~ * ~ ~ * ~ ~

– *The Courtyard of Cortecreas Castle, Rain’s castle.* –

Yuri walked through the path between the square flower beds with a light spring in her step.

More than ten days had passed since Yuri had arrived, and she had already warmed up to the castle’s atmosphere.

She got along easily with the knights because many of them were ex-mercenaries like Rain, who, like Yuri, disliked stiff formalities.

Well, there were still people like Senoa, the aide, who she found difficult to get along with.

But Yuri had been assigned to Leni, the other aide, so she didn’t have to suffer and deal with Senoa personally.

She rather liked Leni, so Yuri had no problems with the situation.

--Except for the fact that all Rain ever did was sleep.

Indeed, Rain had shut himself in his room ever since he had returned and had hardly ever left. He would come out from time to time only to grab a bite to eat or to drink alcohol, and it pissed her off.

This is hardly the time for that, she thought. As strange as it was, she found herself growing irritated at Rain's apparent reluctance to attack Zarmine.

It appeared that Senoa shared the sentiment, as the indignation in her eyes grew day by day. At this rate, she risked snapping at him once again.

Surprisingly, however, the other knights apart from Senoa put their wholehearted trust in Rain. He was popular with them too.

Most of them had even approved of Rain's decision to avoid fighting in the war. Their approval likely stemmed from the fact that most of the knights had once been mercenaries who saw little point in fighting in a war they couldn't win. It wasn't as if Yuri didn't understand the sentiment, but.....

"Tch. Geez, he really likes to mess with people,"

Yuri muttered as she kicked aside a pebble with a scowl on her face.

"Hm?"

She heard people cheering from somewhere.

Turning to the source of the noise, she found a crowd of knights near the ramparts. They had formed something of a circle and appeared to be engaged in some kind of activity.

Yuri walked toward the commotion without a second thought as her curiosity got the better of her.

"Oh!..... It's Captain Leni."

Leni stood in the middle of the circle holding two swords that were slightly shorter than normal. He was sparring with one of his men.

They appeared to be in the middle of sword training.

“Huh. Captain Leni fights with dual blades,”

Yuri noted with a hint of admiration as she observed the match from behind the crowd.

The knight serving as Leni’s opponent was breathing heavily and looked to be in a little pain. It was hard to believe, but it seemed that Leni was completely overpowering him.

Inch by inch. One step at a time.

The armored knight moved with determination. He crouched low and drew closer to Leni, hesitantly observing his captain all the while. Yet, Leni simply stood and waited.

Finally seeming to make up his mind, the knight swung his sword toward Leni’s neck with considerable speed.

Clang!

Metal hit metal with a clear ringing sound.

Leni had stopped the deathblow with one sword and apparent ease. He held his other sword right up against the knight’s throat.

Wow, I couldn’t even see that! He’s actually pretty strong.....

Surprised, Yuri began to see Leni in a better light. She had thought that he was just some mild-mannered aide, but in actuality he had the skills to justify his position and then some.

“Alright, that’s the end of this round. It’s already noon, so let’s wrap up for today. Everyone, dismissed!”

Leni ordered, fixing his slightly disheveled blond hair.

“Yessir~!”

The crowd cheered just like the ex-mercenaries they were and promptly dispersed.

“Captain Leni!”

Leni looked up and greeted Yuri with a smile when she jogged over to him.

“Whoa, Yuri! You were watching?”

“Yeah. You’re really strong, Captain. I was impressed.”

“N, nah. I’m not that great,”

Leni said with an embarrassed smile, blushing.

Then, he came up with a great idea and clasped his hands together and exclaimed,

“Oh yeah! I was just about to eat lunch; wanna eat with me? I have plenty of extra food!”

“Thanks for the food!”

Replied a hungry Yuri without missing a beat. She had never been one to turn down free food.

“Can I really have some?”

Yuri asked as they sat down on one of the many wooden benches in the area.

She asked only out of courtesy.

She had also nonchalantly left a bit of space between them as she sat.

“I brought sandwiches today,”

Announced Leni as he happily unbundled a package of cloth with a bright smile stretched across his face. Inside it was an unexpectedly large lunchbox stuffed to the brim with sandwiches.

“Yay! Well, don’t mind if I do.”

“Go right on ahead.”

Yuri quickly reached for a sandwich and bit into it without reserve.

“It’s delicious!”

It was pretty good for a meat-and-vegetable sandwich. Yuri cradled her cheeks with both hands as she savored the flavor.

“Hahaha. Have as many as you’d like.”

“Thank you soo much!”

Yuri devoted her undivided attention to the food for a short while.

When she had finally come back down to earth, she asked Leni, who had been watching her with a smile, a question that had suddenly popped into her head.

“Come to think of it, does General Rain participate in the training from before?”

“Hm~? Well, he only spars with us once or twice a year or so. He usually just avoids them. Says they’re a pain.”

Leni shrugged in slight embarrassment after meeting Yuri’s curious gaze.

The gesture suggested that he had stopped trying to get Rain to practice with them long ago.

“Well that certainly sounds like him.I’ve been meaning to ask, Captain Leni, but between you and General Rain, who’s stronger?”

Leni choked a little the moment Yuri asked. He looked as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"I don't even come close to reaching the soles of his feet. It's not even funny..... you shouldn't even be comparing us to begin with."

"Huh..... is the General really that strong?"

"...? Yuri, weren't you acquaintances with the General?"

Leni asked in bewilderment.

"Huh?! Oh, no, our fathers knew each other, but the General and I aren't really....."

Yuri quickly made up an excuse as she broke out in a cold sweat.

Luckily, Leni believed her. In fact, he almost looked happier than before.

"Huh, so that's how it is. Hehehe."

"Umm...?"

"Oh, sorry about that. So, you wanted to know if the General's strong, right? Well, 'course he is~. He's probably stronger than he lets on, even with all of his bragging."

Yuri opened her eyes wide in surprise.

"Are you--for real?"

"Yep. In any case, I'd never want him as my enemy. Compared to him, I'd take on Zarmine any day."

Leni frowned and began to tremble. Even just imagining Rain as his enemy had caused him to react.

So he's really that strong..... Yuri groaned to herself.

Leni continued in a serious voice,

“I bet he could even defeat a dragon. I’ve never heard of anyone who actually did, but the General probably could.”

Whoa, now that’s just ridiculous, Yuri protested silently.

Dragons were the most powerful species in the world by far.

Their magic, magic-nullification field, powerful breath, and overwhelming strength -no other living creature stood a chance against them. They were virtually invincible.

The legends of old stated that ‘anyone who defeats a dragon one-on-one will obtain their strength and magical might.’

Many had believed the legends and had challenged a dragon since ancient times past, only to never be heard of again.

There weren’t even whispers of rumors about anyone succeeding in the task. Dragon Slayers existed only in the songs of bards.

If anyone who could have defeat a dragon, it would have been the superior “daemon” race that had died out over a millennium ago.

Daemons, who looked no different from humans in appearance but wielded terrible magic and might, could have stood up against the mythical beasts. But they had died out a thousand years ago, while warring against humanity for dominance over the world, so it was impossible to be certain.

Leni smiled wryly as Yuri’s face betrayed her obvious disbelief.

“I know it’s hard to believe. But someday, you’ll come to understand just how ridiculously strong he is too, Yuri. The General is superhuman.”

“Right.....”

--Well, I’m not denying that he’s strong, but...

But I know..... Yuri softly shook her head.

No matter what Leni said, there was always someone stronger. And Yuri, who had been in Zarmine, had seen that ridiculously strong someone with her very own eyes. The image of the king with flowing silver hair was still fresh in her memories.

Countless criminals had been assembled to the execution grounds, and King Leygur had stood before them.

Had *that* been just for practice?

In any case, he had buried dozens of criminals in a sea of blood without sparing a single one. He was truly..... a monster.

I know..... That no matter how strong Rain is, he can't beat him.

The sandwich that had been in Yuri's hand suddenly disappeared while Yuri was lost in thought.

"Wha...?"

Yuri was dumbstruck only for a moment.

A horse's long neck had abruptly appeared between Leni and Yuri. Still chewing lazily, the well-bred white horse stuck its head into Leni's lunchbox and stole away the remaining sandwiches.

Then, it continued to chew in leisure.

"You, you stupid horse! You're Kris, aren't you?!"

The horse didn't respond, but Yuri felt that Kris was mocking her with a sidelong glance.

.....Of course, it was just a coincidence.

"Ugh!-- this really pisses me off!"

"Hey there, Kris. You'll eat anything, as always, won't you? It's

hard to believe that you're a horse. Want some of this too?"

Leni offered the horse the slice that he was holding. Kris quickly gobbled it up and thus, all of the sandwiches were gone.

"Wait a minute, Captain! Why are you spoiling the horse like that?! To begin with, why is there a horse here instead of being tied up somewhere?!"

"Huh? Um, well... The General ordered us not to tie up Kris in the stables. That's why Kris is free to roam about wherever she pleases."

"Why the heck did he order that?"

"Who can say..."

Leni nonchalantly tilted his head sideways. He probably did not harbor any ill will behind the gesture, but his unconcerned attitude served only to upset Yuri further.

"In the General's words, Kris is his beloved partner and a pegasus to boot, so it'd be rude to tie her up. But I wonder if pegasi really exist, though."

"That's not the problem here!"

Yuri slammed down on the bench in a burst of anger, causing Leni to immediately straighten up.

"S, sorry! You're absolutely right, hahaha."

Yuri shot a glare at him. Then, she abruptly stood up.

She put her hands on her hips and turned her piercing gaze to the offending horse.

"Kris! It's a great sin to steal other people's lunches! Understand?!"

The horse completely ignored her.

Kris snorted and turned away from Yuri after quickly surveying the scene to find that there were no more sandwiches left.

It was undoubtedly just a coincidence, but Kris had turned just so that her lush tail slapped Yuri across the cheek. Then, Kris simply trotted away.

“Ugh. I hate that horse. I bet she gets it from her master.”

Leni spoke up in an almost inaudible voice as Yuri stomped her feet,

“But I don’t think that she’s ever done anything against you, Yuri.....”

Yuri purposefully ignored his comment.

At the time, Rain was laying on his bed and staring at the ceiling of his room on the highest floor of the castle.

There was nothing worth mentioning about his room, other than that it was rather simple for a room belonging to the lord of the castle. His bed was quite normal as well, and was not something grand and canopied like the ones that the nobles favored.

In the middle of the room was a round table with numerous liquor bottles on top of it.

Rain had emptied every single one of them himself.

“Oh, jeez,”

Raid said with a sigh as he unfolded the letter that he had already read multiple times yet again. It was a letter from Ralphus that had reached the castle the same time that he had, as if it had chased after him all the way.

Still sprawled out on his bed, he read the short letter again.

“Ugh.”

Rain groaned no matter how many times he read it. He was beginning to get tired of Ralphus' good nature.

The first half of the letter was fine.

As always, Ralphus told him to stop drinking so much and to be wary of the plague, generally saying this and that as if he was Rain's mother. They were all things that Ralphus would truly say.

It was the second half of the letter that Rain had issues with.

Incidentally, Rain.

I have no idea how you came to be acquainted with Her Royal Highness the Princess, but her life will be in danger if we lose this upcoming battle.

As you two are close, I would like you to protect Her Highness and lend her your strength.

And also..... I don't want to meddle in your relationship with her, but take her age and position into account before doing anything rash (you know what I mean). Alright?

That is all.

““That is all” my ass; the hell?!”

Rain tossed the letter over the sideboard in a huff.

Ralphus was being unreasonable. And besides, while Ralphus had asked Rain in his letter to look after the princess, Rain had never even met her before to begin with.

Does he think that I'd actually lay my hands on this princess of his? I'm not so desperate that I'd lay my hands on a girl I don't even know.

To begin with, Rain could only imagine all too well what kind of joy the daughter of the stuffy old King Douglass would be.

He wanted to tell Ralphus to cut him some slack.

He already disliked nobles to begin with, so to think that he would lay his hands on royalty! And the king's daughter, at that! Surely, she was some bratty, stuffy, silly girl who couldn't even do simple housework.

Rain cursed his friend with every profane insult that he knew of. But all things despite, he knew that he would end up doing exactly what Ralphus had asked of him.

"Well, whatever. I guess I'll do something about the princess when I go to rescue Michelle,"

He muttered after he was finished complaining.

He pictured the beautiful, melancholy girl in his mind. He had promised. He would return for her no matter what.

But at the moment, Rain was more worried about Ralphus. After all, he was probably deep in the heat of battle by now.

At this point, things had undeniably deviated from Rain's calculations. Zarmine was exercising more caution against him than he had expected. According to Yuri, countless eyes surveilled his every move.

If he were to leave his castle, Zarmine's main force would be alerted immediately. That, in turn, would cause Zarmine to grow warier and prevent him from saving Ralphus.

Rain didn't care about King Douglass, who had used Rain for his own gain without a second thought, and the king's death would have been no skin off of his back. But he had to save Ralphus.

"It'd weigh on my conscience if I didn't. That's all there is to it,"

Rain muttered as if he was trying to convince himself that it was true.

In any event, he had debts that he still needed to repay. Ralphus had intervened on his behalf during the numerous occasions when the king had flown into a fit of rage against him, though he had never once asked Ralphus to do so.

Rain, too, had saved Ralphus' life once, but that didn't even begin to cover for what he still owed Ralphus.

And yet, Ralphus always worked to thank Rain for that one time at every opportunity, saying, "words cannot express how grateful I was that day. I will never forget what you've done for me."

He was truly too kind for his own good.

In fact, it made saving him a pain in the ass.

As a rule, Ralphus would never abandon his homeland, Sunkwoll.

In other words, Rain could only keep him safe by forcing Zarmine to retreat.

After all, that idiot, Ralphus, was a passionate type of idiot who would even take on an army numbering in the tens of thousands alone without a second thought.

'I wonder if Gunther's doing well?'

Rain ground his teeth at his inability to act. Perhaps it had been a mistake to have gotten himself put under house arrest on purpose.

Perhaps he should have accompanied that dumbass of a king, even despite all of the disadvantages.

"Fina..... did I make the wrong choice?"

Rain asked in a quiet voice. But then-

Crash!!

Someone had opened the door with a ridiculous amount of force

without even knocking. Or rather, they had kicked it open.

Rain turned his head to find Yuri blocking his doorway with her feet spread apart.

“Hold it right there!”

She jabbed her pointer finger in his direction and continued,

“Who the heck is Fina?!”

“.....Eh?”

“Don’t “eh?” me!”

Clad in a blouse and a skirt, Yuri made a rude entrance into Rain’s room and stomped up to the foot of his bed. It was difficult to tell who the real master of the castle was.

Then, she blurted out,

“And what’s up with your attitude? How much longer are you gonna just lie there and stare at your empty liquor bottles? Get your damn act together! You’re such a slob! This is why you got put under house arrest to begin with! And do something about that damn stupid horse of yours!”

“Argh!! You’re so annoying!!”

Her abuse seemed like it would have continued for quite a while if he let it, so Rain interrupted her and began to get up. He continued,

“I’m in the middle of thinking about something important right now! I don’t have the time to deal with you. If you need to come see me, do it when you have something extremely important to say or when you’re wearing something skimpy and see-through!”

“What the heck are you talkin-- Hey, don’t sleep on me!”

“You’re a loud one, aren’t you?”

Rain, who had been on the brink of falling back into his sheets, begrudgingly got up again.

He sat up on the side of his bed and looked towards Yuri, who was still standing next to him.

“So, what do you want? I knew you were there because I felt your presence, but why are you going around eavesdropping on other people’s rooms?”

“Oh phooey, it’s not like you had anything to hide in the first place. I was all fired up to come here, you know. Oh, and who’s Fina?”

“.....Quit jumping around all over the place. I have no idea what you’re talking about,”

Rain half-heartedly pointed out before suddenly coming up with a great idea and breaking into a smug smile.

“Wh, what. Why’re you smiling like that?”

Yuri asked in disgust as she took a step backwards.

“Nah, it’s nothing important. You know, going off of your black hair and eyes, you’re originally a commoner from Sunkwoll, aren’t you?”

“.....So what of it?”

“I’ll get right to the point. --Are you interested in switching sides?”

Yuri held her breath and blinked her light green eyes. She stared at Rain with a blank look. *She’s taken the bait*, thought Rain. He pressed on,

“You’re only spying for a living, not because you actually want to, right? It’s pretty hard to survive as a commoner in this country. But as long as you’re paid, there’s no reason for you to have to work for the enemy, is there?”

“That’s..... well... It’s not like I enjoyed doing it.”

“Right, exactly. So how does twenty silver a month sound?”

“Twenty silver..... that’s fifty-thousand taran? Hmm~ How about a little bit more?”

Yuri began to lean forward in excitement.

“Twenty-One silver, then.”

“Hey, you’re pretty stingy with your numbers, aren’t you? You’re a man; show off your wealth a bit more!”

Rain scowled and shook his head.

“Idiot. The lord of a castle should always be frugal. --How about twenty-five silver?”

“Says the guy who drinks expensive liquor all the time! Think about my younger sister’s..... I mean brother’s school tuition!”

“Who cares about guys?! Alright, how about I buy your future prospects as a woman too for thirty silver! Just take it already, you thief!!”

“Deal!”

Yuri clapped her hands together with a sparkle in her eyes.

Then, she nestled closer into Rain’s personal space and asked,

“You’re really gonna pay be thirty silver a month, right?”

“Yeah. But you better work hard to earn your keep.”

“Okay! This is great~. Now I can stop lying to my sister--I mean my brother!”

Yuri jumped with joy. Apparently, she had kept the fact that she

was spying to make ends meet from her family. She had probably felt horrible about it, too.

“Oh, but--”

“What’s up?”

“What were you planning to do..... if I turned down the offer?”

Yuri tilted her head to the side in a cutesy manner.

Rain broke out into a wicked grin and replied,

“I would have told Zarmine that you’d switched sides anyway. Then they’d stop employing you even if it wasn’t true. I wasn’t planning on giving you much of a choice to begin with.”

“.....You’re just plain evil, aren’t you?”

Yuri opened her mouth in a show of disgust.

To the contrary, Rain seemed pretty pleased with himself as he took her insult with stride.

And then-

Lights began to flicker around the center of the room and began to take shape.

“Magic Vision?” asked Yuri.

Before Rain could answer, the lights converged and took the shape of a man with sharp eyes.

Of course, the actual person in question was actually quite far away.

“.....Who’s that depressed guy who looks like he’s given up on life?”

“Later, later. This is an important report,”

Rain briskly brushed Yuri off.

Judging from the timing of his appearance, the report must have to do with Ralphus' rescue.

"Reporting, Lord Rain,"

The somewhat blurry image of Gunther bowed respectfully and greeted Rain, giving credit to Rain's suspicions.

~~*~~*~~*~~

Shelfa was all alone in a garden deep within the heart of the royal palace. Galfort Castle was currently enveloped in a veil of silence. There had been a commotion until just yesterday as its inhabitants made plans to flee, but now there was hardly anyone left to be seen.

Shelfa leaned against a tree near the small pond at the edge of the garden and gazed over the water's surface.

This was her favorite place.

It was a quiet place to begin with, but it was especially silent today.

The only thing that she could hear was the sound of the wind rustling the tree's leaves overhead.

She could not hear the sounds of people talking to one another or the hustle and bustle of daily life, even though it was currently noon.

"This castle has truly become empty..."

Shelfa muttered.

She knew what had caused the silence. Two days ago, the senior statesmen had received news of Sunkwoll's defeat through Magic Vision.

Although they had not believed it at first, each and every one of them had fallen into despair as they received more detailed reports of

the battle.

All of the high generals who had participated in the battle, save Ralphus, had died in battle. To top it off, her father the king had been betrayed and killed.

A strict gag order had been imposed on that information, but rumors of it had spread in the blink of an eye.

It was impossible to seal the lips of man.

According to the rumors, the senior statesmen, starting from the chancellor downwards, had been going around saying things like, “to think that Lord Ganoa would...!”

Shelfa thought it was ridiculous.

She had always disliked Ganoa. In fact, she had recently grown to hate him even more because he had always looked at her with dirty eyes during the rare occasions they had met.

Shelfa had not been surprised at all when her ladies-in-waiting told her that Ganoa had betrayed Sunkwool.

After all, he was the type of man who would do something like that.

Her father had never had the ability to discern the true natures of his men.....

“Father.....”

With a soft sigh, Shelfa tried to picture her late father’s face.

However, she could not no matter how hard she tried. Her father had rarely met with her; she was lucky to see him even once a year.

She could only remember him glaring at her with hatred in his eyes during the few times she did get to meet him. And she barely had any memories of talking with him.

In all honesty, Shelfa wasn't that upset about her father's death. Though she did get somewhat depressed whenever she thought, '*I must be a fairly cold person*'.

I want to see Rain.....

This wish occupied most of her heart. She was truly relieved that Rain was still alive.

Three years ago, Shelfa had met Rain for the first time and had opened up her heart to him after brushing upon his kindness.

Ever since that day, Shelfa, who had always been lonely, had begun to believe that she was no longer alone.

Naturally, she had never forgotten even a single moment of that day.

Shelfa closed her eyes...

...And promptly recalled those precious, nostalgic memories.....

~~*~~*~~*~~

The expansive garden at the back of Galfort Castle was one of Shelfa's few 'favorite places.'

Numerous flowers colored the flowerbeds every season, and a Jura tree spread its long branches toward the surface of a small pond deep within the garden.

Shelfa's one true joy was to draw pictures here alone.

She had planned to spend more time drawing than usual because her governess had let her free early that day due to a "ball" or something.

Squinting from the sunlight, which was still very bright despite the fact that it was already late summer, Shelfa briskly walked to her usual spot at the roots of the Jura tree and sat down. Sitting in the

shade was just as cool as she had expected it to be. After brushing back her luxurious blonde hair, she placed her drawing board in her lap and picked up her brush. Then, she tilted her head slightly to the side.

What shall I draw today?I've already drawn the scenery so many times.....

She then decided to draw a pretty bird or something, but could not find any nearby.

After a bit of contemplation, she decided to draw a person instead.

Naturally, she did not have any intention of asking someone from the castle to be her model. For Shelfa, who was used to being alone, there was nothing more unpleasant than having to interact with other people. And it wasn't as if there was anyone in particular that she wanted to draw anyway. The only person she would have wanted to draw was her mother, who had passed away three years ago, but she decided against it because it would have hurt too much.

Thus, she decided to draw an imaginary person instead. As luck would have it, Shelfa had recently been dreaming about a man she had never met before.

Vaguely picturing him in her mind, Shelfa began to draw with great fervor.

Her brush glided over the paper more smoothly than usual.

Hmm, this is turning out well..... My hand feels like it's moving of its own accord somehow..... This is the first time this has happened.

After she had been drawing absentmindedly for a while, Shelfa thought that she could hear someone singing from somewhere.

She abruptly stopped moving her hand.

It had not been just her imagination.

She could definitely hear someone's voice. Somebody was singing.

A man was singing rather poorly to himself about a romance between a man and a woman. More importantly, he was drawing nearer by the second.

Suddenly, his singing grew quieter. Perhaps he had realized that someone was nearby. Still, he did not stop singing as he grew ever closer.

Normally, Shelfa would have been thinking about how to quietly exit the scene. She could not help the fact that she hated interacting with strangers.

If she was going to have an unpleasant experience anyway, then it was much easier to run away and avoid them entirely.

But she did not feel like running away this time.

She could not fathom why.

It might have been because she had been attracted to how the owner of the voice was singing so openly and freely (though it was atrocious), or it could have been because she had been captivated by his pleasant bass. Shelfa still did not really know, even in hindsight.

In any event, she had lost her chance to flee and the man in question had appeared on the other side of the flower bed.

Shelfa opened her sapphire eyes wide as soon as she saw him.

“Whoa!!”

Stopping his cheerful singing, the man stared intently at Shelfa.

He was dressed in an all-black ensemble with a black shirt and black pants, on top of his already black hair and eyes, and was quite tall.

He had finely chiseled masculine features and sharp eyes. Yet, the

depths of his eyes twinkled like those of a mischievous child's.

She did not know this man.Or at least, she had never met him before in person.

To her surprise, he looked like the physical manifestation of the imaginary person she had been drawing; in other words, he looked exactly like the man from her dreams.

“Hmm, this is quite the surprise. Hey, Little one. You're one hell of a beauty, you know that?”

He said in an infinitely cheery voice, oblivious to Shelfa's feelings.

'Little one' most likely referred to her. It was the first time that she had been called something like that, but strangely enough, she did not dislike it.

Perhaps it was because he had also called her a beauty.

He had praised her straight from his heart, without even a trace of the usual superficial flattery that other people generally snuck in. That was why she had not disliked it.

“My name's Rain; what's yours?”

“My, my name.....?”

Shelfa, who had not expected him to ask for her name, began to panic. Come to think of it, how had he even come here in the first place? Only those who had ties to the royal family had access to the garden.

“What's wrong? You can at least tell me your name, right?”

“Y, yes! Um, my name is Shel-- I mean, Michelle.”

On the spur of the moment, she gave him a name that had sprung up from the depths of her hearth.

Shelfa had not wanted to give him her real name for some reason. Thinking back, she had probably already lost her heart to Rain at the time.

She had not wanted to distance Rain, whom she had just met, from her by revealing that she was a member of Sunkwoll's royalty.

She did not want to ruin the mood that he had set by speaking so amenably to her.

"Oh, Michelle, was it? It has a pretty ring to it. I guess lovely ladies really do come with lovely names. But still..... that presence I felt earlier..... well, whatever."

Rain contemplated for a bit and quickly nodded to himself. Then, suddenly seeming to regain his interest in Shelfa, he unfastened the longsword with an extravagantly crafted hilt from his hip and crouched down in front of her.

"And your age? My guess is that you're around twelve? By the way, I'm twenty-two"

"I just turned thirteen not long ago."

"I see, I see. It must be some kind of fate that we met here. So, I hope we get along, Little one."

"Yes. Um..... I hope so, too."

"Yeah. So, what'cha doing all the way out here?"

That was the exact question that she had wanted to ask of him, but instead Shelfa obediently picked up her drawing board and held it out for him to see. She had never shown anyone else her drawings before.

"Umm..... Isn't this a portrait of me? Huh, you could probably eat with this. It's pretty good."

"What do you mean when you say that I could eat with it?"

“I mean that you could make a living out of it. But before that, have we met before? Though I don’t think I’d ever forget a face as pretty as yours...”

“Today is the first time we have met, Sir Rain,”

Shelfa answered. Then, she explained how she would often draw in the garden alone and how she had arbitrarily decided to draw a person today and how the person in her drawing somehow ended up looking exactly like Rain.

.....She was too embarrassed to tell him that she had already seen him before in her dreams, so she didn’t.

After listening to her, Rain tilted his head to the side and said,

“So you mean it was a complete coincidence? Even still, it really does look exactly like me.”

“Yes..... It’s quite strange.”

“Hmmm,”

Rain suddenly looked up at the sky and began to ponder.

After a while, he said something outrageous with a solemn look..... and in a dead serious voice:

“Perhaps this was destiny.”

“Destiny?”

“Yeah, destiny. It was meant to be. You and I may share a special relationship--in the future.”

“A, a special relationship?”

“Exactly, like sweethearts or lovers or something.”

He didn’t seem to be joking around.

Shelfa immediately flushed bright red. Putting the content of Rain's words aside, she was more exasperated with the fact that she was not averse to the idea at all.

Especially when she considered that she had only just met this man.

"What's with the sour look? Do the difference in our class statuses bother you as a noble?"

"Eh?! H, how did you know I was a noble?"

"Blonde hair and blue eyes are basically the symbol of Sunkwoll nobility, you know. And your eyes stand out even more because they're blue all the way to the sclera."

"Oh, right."

"Well, putting that off to the side..... You don't like the idea of being with me? Do you think that class status is everything too, like the other nobles? That commoners should be held in contempt?"

"No! Never..... Rather, if anything, it's the nobility that I dislike....."

Shelfa looked down at her feet in sorrow.

This was how she truly felt.

In her father's eyes, she was just another political tool. A simple tool that was to be married off to another country once she reached a suitable age.

That was all that she would ever be. That was why nobody ever really kept her company.

And her father had only grown even colder still after her mother had passed away.

"Hey, Michelle."

Rain's large hands tenderly cupped around her cheeks.

"Ah!"

"Children shouldn't be making faces like that."

"Sir Rain?"

"You can ditch the 'sir' and just call me Rain. Anyway, stop making that face. 'Kay?"

Rain whispered kindly.

Large hands that rested gently against her cheeks--

Shelfa felt as if the warmth from Rain's hands were slowly seeping into the innermost chambers of her heart.

This was probably the first time that someone had talked so kindly to her since her mother had passed away.

Shelfa was moved to the verge of tears.

Before her tears could fall, she forced her trembling lips together and asked him a question.

"S..... Rain, why are you here?"

"Oh. I'm a centurion, you see. I did pretty well for myself in the last war, and, can you believe this? They invited me to a ball as a reward. Geez, I'd much rather that they raised my social standing instead of this pointless crap. This's such a pain."

"Oh, so you escaped from the ball and came all the way here,"

Shelfa said as she nodded. At the same time, she realized that Rain must have been an extremely skilled knight.

After all, her father, who was notorious for his fervent belief in the social hierarchy, had promoted someone who was not even a noble to

a knight captain.

Then, Rain placed a hand on top of Shelfa's head.

"And what about you?"

"Well I, I always come to draw here, so....."

"Hmmm."

Rain stared at Shelfa with a suspicious frown on his face.

Had he figured out who she really was?

Shelfa began to fret..... However, Rain had been more concerned about an entirely different matter, as he then asked,

"Does that mean you're always here alone?"

"Yes. I like being alone,"

Shelfa answered, relieved. In turn, Rain vehemently replied,

"That won't do! It's fine to have time to yourself every now and then, but you shouldn't always be alone!"

"Do..... you really think so?"

"I most certainly do. Alright! It's a good thing that I'm here today."

Rain abruptly jumped upright and extended a hand to Shelfa. He continued,

"Taking care of a potential future wife is much more important to me than some stuffy ball. Though I wish that I'd met you ten years from now,"

He said with a bright grin. She had somehow been promoted from a potential lover to a potential wife. Shelfa silently stared at Rain in bewilderment. When Shelfa didn't answer, he asked,

“Don’t get it? I’m saying that we should have some fun together. You’d probably never guess, but I used to be called ‘the ultimate playground’ when I was younger, you know.”

“Are you really inviting me?”

“Is there anyone else here to invite? C’mom!”

“But I.....”

Shelfa subconsciously caught her breath as she reflexively began to refuse.

He has such clear eyes..... Deep, black eyes that look like you could fall into them.

And they’re so kind..... So very, very kind..... Even more so than my mother’s were.

She felt her reluctance melt away like snow on a sunny day as she was mesmerized by his eyes.

“Are you..... sure?”

Shelfa asked in a quiet voice, unable to refuse,

“.....Are you really inviting someone like me?”

“Yeah. Unless you don’t want to?”

“No, I do, Sir Rain. I mean, Rain. I put myself in your care,”

Shelfa said with a radiant smile that she had thought she had long since forgotten how to make and tightly grasped the hand that was stretched out in front of her.

~~*~~*~~*~~

It was hard to believe that it had already been three years.

She remembered it as if it had only been yesterday.

Right here, that day.

At noon, they had eaten the bread that Rain had brought with him, and he had stayed and played with her until evening.

Most of the games he had taught her were meant for boys, but Shelfa had still enjoyed them nonetheless.

She had been content just to watch Rain smile so jovially and to have him gently pat her on the head from time to time.

His black eyes had carefully watched over her as she jumped about.

His large, warm hand had immediately reached out to her whenever she tripped and fell.

Shelfa had wished that that happy moment would have lasted forever.

But it hadn't. Eventually, the sun went down, and it had been time for Rain to leave.

"Now, then. I should head back soon."

His words caused Shelfa to freeze in her tracks.

She would be alone again starting tomorrow..... She felt like this truth would crush her heart.

And that wasn't the only thing. For Shelfa had already realized.

That she had fallen in love with Rain.

She wanted to stay by his side forever, watching him smile. If possible, she also wanted him to hold her close.

That was why Shelfa had asked,

“Please, take me with you!”

“Whoa there, Michelle-”

“I don’t want to stay here. I don’t want to be lonely anymore. Rain, I..... I want to go with you!”

“Even still. You’re asking me to travel with a child in tow...”

Said Rain, looking troubled.

But, perhaps because he had been moved by how desperate Shelfa was, he began to wrack his brains with a slight frown on his face.

Shelfa knew that she had asked a lot from him.

However, her feelings for Rain were undoubtedly real, and so too was her ‘wish.’

Shelfa threw herself at Rain with only her pure emotions. In that regard, she was even willing to throw away everything else just to be with him.

“Alright. Then let’s do this.”

Coming up with an idea, Rain stood up and began rummaging around his pocket. He fished out a silver coin that had been turned into a pendant by threading a chain through it. Then, he continued,

“I’ll give this to you.”

“What is it?”

As far as Shelfa could tell, strange letters that she had never seen before were engraved onto the surface of the coin.

The coin itself was fairly old, as indicated by its lackluster shine and color that had been worn down by the years.

“What do these letters say?”

“Well, this is a magic item, you see, and the words say ‘bring me to where that person is.’ It’s a relic from a kingdom that fell a long, long time ago. From even before the Holy War, when mages were more common. It’s true.”

“This is.....”

Shelfa gazed at the coin in admiration. It wasn’t as if magic had disappeared altogether, but it had definitely declined sharply since the ancient times.

Thus, magic weapons and items imbued with semi-permanent magic were rare and worth a fortune apiece.

“I found it in some ancient ruins while I was travelling through the Northern Lands..... It’s really true! I only have two, but I’ll let you keep this one,”

Said Rain in a strangely determined tone as he reached behind Shelfa’s slender neck and fastened on the coin pendant for her.

Then, he gently placed his hands on her shoulders and looked straight into her eyes and said,

“Listen close, Michelle. I still have things that I have to do. That’s why I can’t I can’t take you with me right now.”

Shelfa opened her mouth to protest, but was stopped by Rain’s steady gaze. He continued,

“Just five years; wait for me for just another five years. I’ll have settled my feelings-- no, I’ll have finished what I need to do by then, and you’ll also have grown up. So, just wait until this day five years from now. If you still haven’t changed your mind by then, Little one, I’ll take you with me wherever you wish to go.”

“Rain.....”

She had wanted to protest so much.

If it had been possible..... she had wanted to say that she couldn't possibly wait for five whole years.

But she understood that Rain had a good point. She could not expect him to suddenly take a small child around with him, especially when he had important things to do.

So instead, Shelfa made an effort to keep her emotions from showing on her face.

She had resolved to trust Rain and wait. She did her best to smile and nod, and she thought that she had pulled it off.

But it seemed like her real feelings were immediately obvious to Rain, who was much more mature than she was.

Rain smiled and lightly pat her on the head.

"C'mon, stop looking so sad,"

He said gently. He continued,

"That's why I'm giving you this coin. It'll only work once, but you should use it if you ever find yourself in a situation where you absolutely can't wait for me any longer. It's really easy to use. Just grip the coin as tightly as you can, picture me in your mind, and shout out my name. Then--"

"And then?"

Shelfa asked, filled with hope.

"--The magic will take over, and you'll be teleported to my side in an instant no matter where I am. I swear that it's true,"

Guaranteed Rain.

With a soft sigh, Shelfa clenched the coin tightly against her heart.

As long as I have this, I can see Rain whenever I want. No matter

when, no matter where.

“Earth to Michelle? You look like you want to use it right now, but it’d be better to save it until you really need it.”

Then, he turned around for some reason and glibly warned her,

“There’s a matter of timing, too. It’d be one thing if you suddenly appeared while I was doing my business, but it’d be another matter entirely if you dropped down on top of me while I was hitting up some other girl!”

“But that’s.....”

A prickly pain stung at Shelfa’s heart.

She did not understand what he had meant, but the part about ‘some other girl’ had still hurt.

It was proof that she had completely fallen for him.

“But I understand, Rain. You’re giving me this coin as a means of emotional support, right?”

“You’re as bright as I’d thought you’d be, Little one. You should always save your trump card for last,”

Rain said with a satisfied smile, nodding. He continued,

“I know that you’ll be able wait. Five years will be over before you know it.”

“.....Yes.”

Yes, perhaps she really could.

As long as she had this coin.

Rain looked at Shelfa as she tightly clutched the coin and smiled, locking his smiling eyes with hers.

“Little one. You’ve really impressed me today. So, in return, I’ll tell you a secret about myself. Wanna hear?”

“Yes, of course!”

“Alright. Then, I’ll tell you something I’ve never told anyone else.”

Rain’s voice grew lower as he spoke.

“The truth is, there’s nothing in this world that scares me. Do you know why?”

“Is it because you’re brave?”

“Nope. It’s not something that impressive. It’s because my ability to feel fear was burned away during an incident that happened a long time ago. Probably.”

Rain gulped and began his story.

“A long time ago, I..... at my hometown.....”

Then, something unbelievable happened.

Rain’s black eyes began to tremble, and a shadow that could only be called fear flickered in the depths of his eyes.

His usually fearless smile wavered as it etched itself on his face, and he began to grow pale.

She couldn’t quite place her finger on it, but Shelfa was sure that a fierce storm was raging through Rain’s heart of hearts. Fear was clearly gnawing away at him like worms.

To think that Rain could be so afraid!

Shelfa reached out her hand the moment she thought this.

“Please, wait!”

Rain was taken aback.

Shelfa tightly clasped Rain's hand and, in a voice so firm that she surprised even herself, said,

".....Rain, you seem to be in so much pain, so much sorrow, so I don't want to hear about it now. I'll wait-- so please tell me later when you are ready to do so."

Rain's cheeks twitched as he drew a soft, relieved sigh. He pressed his cheek against Shelfa's hand for a moment and slowly pulled away.

"Geez..... you're a big softie, aren't you, Michelle? Oh man, I think I might really fall for you in the future."

He let go of her hand and stood up.

His usual fearless smile had returned to his face.

"I'm gonna go now, Little one. I'll definitely keep my promise."

"That last bit was unnecessary. I trust you, Rain. I'll be waiting for you here on this day, five years from now."

Shelfa looked up at Rain and forced herself to smile.

Rain nodded with a broad smile in return, raised a hand in farewell, and turned away from her.

His tall, black-clad figure ventured into the growing darkness without looking back. Shelfa did not move from where she was for a long time, even after he had vanished from her field of vision.

--Rain. Please do tell me the full story one day. I'll always be waiting for you. Always.

~~*~~*~~*~~

A long time had passed since she had parted with Rain.

It had been a truly, truly long three years.

Just how many times had I thought about that day and regretted it?

She regretted that she hadn't tried harder to leave with him..... and that she had lied about her name.

Shelfa leaned against the tree trunk and gazed down at the smooth surface of the pond.

She had lied about her name because she hadn't wanted Rain to hate her for it, but now she regretted the decision. Would Rain laugh it off and forgive her the next time they met?

Next time..... just when will that be?

I want to see Rain..... Shelfa thought sincerely. She wanted run away to him and see his gentle smile once more..... She wanted to see him so much that it was almost unbearable.

In any case, it was no longer possible for her to wait.

Most of Sunkwoll's allies had deserted Galfort Castle, and those that still remained were simply waiting for Zarmine to invade it.

Shelfa had already realized that none of her personal ladies-in-waiting or the castle servants were anywhere to be seen that morning.

They had probably already fled that castle.

It was as if everyone had forgotten about her. Just like how she had been left behind, alone, after her mother had died.

“Rain.....”

She pulled out her coin pendent from her bosom and lovingly caressed its tarnished surface.

If she called out his name and used up the ancient magic that had been charged into the coin, she could go to where Rain was whenever she wished.

That's the reason why this old coin has kept me going ever since I parted ways with Rain.

Shelfa gazed at the coin.

If I used this right now--

She almost called out Rain's name unconsciously. That was all she had to do to see him again.

But-- just as she had done countless times already, she lowered her precious treasure back to her bosom again today.



““You should always save your trump card for last,” was it? Rain, I’ll head your advice,”

Shelfa said out loud, as if she was trying to convince herself, while slowly breaking away from the tree.

She surveyed the entirety of her beloved garden in an attempt to burn it into her memories.

The flowerbeds overflowing with beautiful flowers, the pond filled to the brim with crystal clear water, and the light brown Jura tree with its giant trunk and hefty branches that stretched over the pond.

It’s finally time. I may never return to place ever again.

Even still, Shelfa turned her back on her secret sanctuary. She was willing to sacrifice anything, and would not regret the decision to, if it meant that she could see Rain again.

“I hope there are still horses left in the stables that I can use.”

It would take at least two days by horse to get to Cortecreas Castle if she rode without stopping.

She would have to wear clothes that were easy to move in..... and of course, she’d need to pack a separate outfit for her reunion with Rain.

Shelfa returned to her private chambers to prepare the bare necessities for travel and rushed back out to the corridor once she was done.

--There, Shelfa came across a flustered girl who was around the same age as herself.

She was a live-in castle maid whose black hair was adorned by a white headband.

She had been walking around in a somewhat lost manner-- but she

stopped in relief the moment that she saw Shelfa.

“Your, Your Highness..... thank goodness you’re still here.”

“Miss.....Riella? What are you doing here?”

They hadn’t been particularly close, but Riella was the only girl her age that Shelfa could talk normally to.

Shelfa had always thought that Riella was the more levelheaded of the two, but right now the latter looked like she would burst into tears at any moment.

“I, I had no idea what to do..... Everybody, even the court lady who gave us orders up until yesterday, disappeared.If I may ask, is the rumor about our defeat true?”

It appeared that, while the rumor had spread throughout the castle, it had yet to reach all of the maids.

Shelfa did her best to look calm as she nodded.

“.....Yes, it is.”

“--! No way...”

Riella paled.

As someone who basically lived in the castle, she could not brush off this news.

Just then, heavy footsteps rushed in from the other side of the corridor. To think that people would run within the palace walls--

The two girls looked at each other in shock.....and Shelfa was the first to react.

In a quick display of ingenuity, she threw open a lady-in-waiting’s door that was in front of them.

“In here, hurry!”

She said as she pulled Riella inside by the hand.

Then, Shelfa stopped Riella from screaming out in fear by holding her tight.

--A few seconds later, multiple footsteps stopped in front of Shelfa's private chambers. She heard someone brazenly open the door-- immediately followed by hushed whispering. She had heard these voices before..... they belonged to civil officers whom she knew by face, but not by name.

“Hey, she's not here!”

“That's not possible..... Where else could a weak little girl like her possibly go?”

The two girls, still huddled together, exchanged knowing glances.

Being so close together, Shelfa could only tell all too well that Riella was trembling in fear.

She pat the other girl gently on the back, hoping to alleviate some of her terror.

In truth, Shelfa was scared out of her wits as well. However, her fear only served to strengthen her resolve.

I must get out of here, no matter what it takes!

“Anyway..... We have to hurry up and secure her!”

“Agreed. If we don't have something to give to the enemy-- I mean, to the Zarmine army when they get here, we'll be the ones in trouble!”

“If you get it, then keep searching!”

Several voices replied responded in concurrence and gradually

began to fade away.

Shelfa pulled away from Riella and let out a deep breath.

She had been holding her breath ever since she realized that they had been searching for her.

“What.....people!”

Riella said indignantly. She continued,

“They’re planning on handing you over, Your Highness, so they can save themselves!”

“There’s more to it,”

Shelfa added with a pitiful smile,

“They’re probably hoping to receive a decent post within enemy ranks in exchange.”

“Doesn’t that make your stomach churn, Your Highness?!”

Instead of replying, Shelfa looked Riella straight in the eye and said,

“Miss Riella, you should hurry and get out of here soon too..... Where is your hometown?”

“Well, um, it’s further down.....south. Oh no! This kingdom, this kingdom might end!”

Riella began to tremble again.

She had only just now grasped the current situation.

“That’s perfect. I was planning on heading down south too..... If you don’t mind, may I accompany you along the way?”

Shelfa said as calmly as she could as she gently placed a hand on Riella’s shoulder.

Riella stopped trembling. She looked at Shelfa in a way that she had never had before.

Then, sounding a little awed, she said,

“You keep your composure well, Your Highness.”

For the first time, Shelfa looked down.

She quietly whispered,

“I can’t die until I meet Rain again.”

“--I beg your pardon?”

“It, it’s nothing. We should hurry up and escape..... alright?”

And just as Rain had done to her so many years ago, Shelfa extended her hand to Riella.

A little while later, two guards who still remained at the castle gates caught a glimpse of Princess Shelfa.

They attempted to stop Shelfa and her maid, who rode together on a horse that was sprinting toward, them because it was their duty. They must not allow the Princess to leave the castle no matter what--was the strict order they had been given. Surely, the girl at the reins was the Princess.

And yet--

Snow white riding pants, a simple tunic, and a plain cloak--Shelfa, who wore such garments for the first time in her life, called out in a dignified voice as the two guards attempted to block the exit,

“Please step aside!!”

Affected by the full force and authority of her voice, the guards jumped aside before they were aware of what they were doing.

The horse leapt right in between them and galloped away.

The two guards could only stare, dumbfounded, at the radiant golden hair that fluttered past them.

That day, Shelfa grabbed fate by the reins and directed her own fate for the first time in her life, and left behind the castle that had once been her cage.

Chapter 4 - Reunion

The sun was shining down on Leni, but it wasn't very warm because it was almost winter.

On the contrary, it was rather cold. A chilly wind relentlessly assailed Leni as he sat on a bench in the courtyard. Crimson leaves fluttered down from the trees that had been planted at set intervals inside of the castle walls.

--It's kinda cold. But Yuri might come by, like she did a few days ago.

He was thinking about giving in and returning to the shelter of the castle, but he didn't know if and when Yuri would come. He could not simply let waste the possibility of having lunch together with her.

She had finally taken interest in him and had admired his sword skills, so this was where the real battle began. Just a little more, just a little more(?), and...!

.....Leni did not even stop to consider that Yuri could have seen him train the other day simply by chance.

“Ugh.”

The wind began to grow colder and fiercer, as if it was sneering at Leni's stout, yet pathetic, determination. In response, he persevered even as his fingers grew numb while holding onto his sandwich.

“Well.....At least it's pretty peaceful.”

Leni sighed.

Currently, they were preparing to depart for the frontlines under Rain's orders, but the general in question had not issued any specific directives. On top of that, unlike the knights and squires who worked

under him, Leni, a knight-captain, was not particularly busy to begin with. Well, actually, he wasn't supposed to have as much time on his hand as he did, but he figured that it was necessary to take a break every once and a while.

In other words, nothing was out of the ordinary. Even despite that the leader of the kingdom had died and most of their allied troops had been wiped out. Well, Senoa was making a fuss about it, but she was the only one.

But even still,

--Thought Leni.

Just what in the world was going in the General's brain?

Four days ago, Rain had called his two aides, Leni and Senoa, to his room in the evening.

He was beaming from ear to ear with his ever-youthful face, which made him look younger than he actually was, and had said,

"I received a report about the situation with the Zarmine expedition through Magic Vision today."

He had worn such a cheerful smile on his face. He had been in a good mood, too. And the color of his face looked vibrant and healthy (though this was always the case).

Have we won the battle with a "surprise comeback victory" against all odds?! Have we defeated Zarmine?!

Leni had been convinced that Rain would say something along those lines, so he had grinned like an idiot before Rain had said anything else.

Anyone would have thought the same thing after seeing the General's smile at that time. He wasn't at fault here...

But as the matter stood--the truth had been completely different.

Most of the expeditionary force, save for Lord Ralphus' unit, had been annihilated. King Douglas had been killed in battle due to Ganoa and Gilles' betrayal.....

Leni had thought that his legs would give out under him on the spot. He remembered thinking, *why the heck is the General laughing about this?!* Leni had worked under Rain ever since their mercenary days, before Rain had become a knight of Sunkwoll five years ago, but he was still unable to comprehend this aspect of Rain's personality.

He had paled and had begun to tremble, and Senoa had drawn her sword and waved it around in a violent fit of emotion..... Just remembering the scene gave Leni a headache.

"Well, I guess it doesn't really matter."

Leni looked down at his half-empty lunchbox, put the lid back on with a touch of lingering regret, and stretched with his arms to the sky.

He did not have a personal relationship with the king, and the ever-kind Lord Ralphus had been saved, so the situation wasn't really all that bad.

(And the General was and is my only master to begin with.)

Indeed, while King Douglas had been the ruler of the kingdom, he had never been Leni's liege. Leni had only ever accepted and followed one master.

And, from the bottom of his heart, Leni was glad that Rain had not abandoned Ralphus.

"Oh, Captain~"

A relieved voice called out to Leni and stopped him from leaving.

Turning to its source, Leni saw a youth in his teens jogging toward him. If he remembered correctly, the youth was a squire from a unit that he was in charge of. He did not remember the youth's name, but he was sure of this.

“Did something happen?”

“Um, yessir. Actually, I was at a bit of a loss...”

“About what?”

“I’m on guard duty at the gates today, and someone who looks like a noble that I’ve never seen before came asking for General Rain just now. And, I didn’t know what to do..... She wouldn’t give me her name,”

Said the young gatekeeper, who brought the matter to Leni’s attention with large gestures while still wearing full armor.

Leni listened attentively and nodded while also secretly thinking, *‘why do people always come to me when something happens?’*

Miss Senoa’s here too, so why me? And I was just about to go take a nap, too...

“We can’t let them in, of course,”

Leni said decisively, which he did not do often, while hiding away his inner whimpering. He continued,

“We’re basically at war right now. Even if they look like a noble on the outside, we have no way of knowing if they really are who appear to be. I tell you all the time, right? That you mustn’t let suspicious people in.”

“Yes.....Of course.”

The youth seemed extremely disappointed for some reason.

He stole one last fleeting glance at Leni before reluctantly doing a

right about-face, as if he had seen that there would be no room for compromise.

Leni hardened his heart and deliberately refrained from calling after him.

After all, we're at war right now.

We can't just let someone who won't even give us their name into the castle. Some rules have to be strict, even when we're not really doing much. Yep.

As he was leaving, the youth muttered under his breath,

“Aw man~. And she was such a beauty too. Oh well...”

“Wait a minute, you!!”

Leni had already caught up to youth by the time that he had shouted.

He had reacted immediately.

“My intuition tells me that I need to at least meet with this person. Yeah, I'll go and meet her personally.”

And just as he said he would, Leni quickly departed and left the gatekeeper behind. He also left his lunchbox behind on the bench.

He ignored the youth's confused stammering and hurried on.

“N, no fair! You can't just get a head start like that, Captain Leni!”

Leni simply quickened his pace as the youth continued to call out behind him.

An angel stood before the castle gates.

It was a ridiculous expression, but it had undoubtedly been the first thing that Leni had thought when he laid eyes upon her. The girl

before him was simply that beautiful.

She was probably fourteen to sixteen years old.

Her long, straight, golden hair reached down to her waist. Her large, sapphire eyes grew steadily darker inwards from the outer edges of her iris to her pupils like a gradation. No matter how you looked at it, she was a genuine Sunkwoll noble.

The beauty with gentle, --but strikingly handsome, features looked up at Leni and almost immediately looked back down in crushing disappointment.

She was rather mild-mannered, which was rare for a noble.

“You guys, you’re scaring the lady! Quit staring at her!”

Leni said for the time being, his orders directed at the youth who had called for him and two older guards. Both of the older guards had been gawking at the girl with their mouths wide open.

Unable to defy a direct order, the two guards reluctantly turned their eyes away from her.

As a man himself, Leni understood just how smitten they had been. But he wouldn’t rescind his order, of course.

Then, he stared at the angelic girl himself with an intensity that could have bored holes into her.

“Come now, Miss. Please ask me if you need anything.”

“.....Um. You see, I.....”

The angel lifted up her face ever so slightly and immediately looked down again after meeting Leni’s intense gaze.

“What’s wrong? Please, feel free to ask me anything. I, General Rain’s aide Leni, will--whoa!!”

It had been as sudden as it had been unexpected.

The beautiful girl, who had been shy and bashful up until now, had suddenly drawn closer to Leni.

She had come so close to bumping into him that a sweet fragrance that he could not name tickled Leni's nose.

“Rain's aide! In that case, please let me meet with him!”

She looked up at Leni once more with a strong light in her clear blue eyes.

Apparently, there was more to the docile girl that she had let on.

“Yes, of course...”

Leni subconsciously nodded so many times that he started to get dizzy. He was almost about agree to her every whim and desire then and there.

At that moment, he felt the two gatekeeper's piercing glares.

They brought Leni back to his senses.

Indeed. It was he himself who always strictly enforced the order, “you mustn't let anyone into the castle without a good reason!” to the point that it had become tedious to all parties involved. It would be bad for him to bend the rules because he had been charmed by the allure of some girl. Really bad. It would also cause problems concerning the way he governed his men.

“Ah~, sorry 'bout that.”

Feeling a little self-conscious under his men's piercing glares, Leni awkwardly cleared his throat. Then, once he had regained the composure in his voice, he asked the happily smiling girl,

“Well, you see, it's not that I wouldn't refuse to take you to see the General if the circumstances called for it, but I'd at least like to ask for

your name and your business with him.”

A shadow instantly fell over the girl’s face. It seemed like she was caught up in some kind of complicated situation.

Still, it was a question that he had to ask, so Leni silently waited for an answer. A bit of time crept by before the troubled-looking girl finally opened her delicate pink lips.

“.....My name is Shelfa.”

“Shelfa? Hmm~, I feel like I’ve heard that name somewhere before...”

Something tugged at the edges of Leni’s memory. He was certain that he’d heard that name before. The two gatekeepers tilted their heads to the side just like Leni, as if they too were of the same opinion.

Unlike Leni, pureblooded nobles had entirely blue eyes like this young girl’s. No part of their eyes was white. Could this girl possibly be someone famous?

“Miss, you’re obviously a noble..... and a noble from a prestigious family, too, right? What’s your full name?”

The silence that followed this question was longer than the previous one had been.

The three men exchanged nervous glances between each other until the girl gave them her name with extreme reluctance.

“My full name is--”

“Yes, it’s...?”

“.....Shelfa Iras Sunkwoll.”

“Shelfa Iras Sunkwoll..... Sunkwoll..... wait, whaaaaaat?!”

Leni startled himself after repeating her name after her. Suffice to say, he was utterly astonished.

There were only a few people in the kingdom who were named after the kingdom itself.

Once the full revelation of the beautiful girl's identity finally sunk in, the three men literally jumped back in surprise.

Oh crap! thought Leni as he felt sweat drip down his brow.

She's one heck of a beauty!

Wait, no.

I have to hurry and inform the General!

“General! GE~NER~AL!”

Leni opened the door without any prior warning and stuck his head inside, his eyes as wide as saucers.

Rain looked away from the map laid out on his table, which he was actually using for once, and sighed deeply.

“.....The hell is wrong with you all? Quit bothering me when I'm finally in the mood for cooking up a plan! And besides, this isn't some dingy room from some cheap-ass inn. It's the room of the most important person in this castle. So at least knock, would you?!”

“That's not that important! Something huge's happened! Really huge! Something so huge that everything else pales in comparison!”

“You're being repetitive. Spit it out already.”

“Alright. I'll tell you; are you ready?”

Leni took in a deep breath and declared with a touch of theatrical flair,

“She’s here at the castle! The Princess herself! I was so surprised!”

“Cut it down a notch!”

Rain rebuked sharply while begrudgingly getting up from his seat.

Oh, so I didn’t have to go and pick her up.

“.....You don’t seem very surprised...?”

Leni asked with a hint of suspicion.

“Well, yeah. I just got a letter from Ralphus asking me to take care of the Princess, and the Princess must have heard about the arrangement from Ralphus. He probably told her to come and find me if anything happened. Well, I guess there’s nothing I can do about the fact that she’s already here.”

“You, you brush her off so easily..... She’s a real beauty you know, the Princess, that is. Shouldn’t you be a bit more.....”

“Quit lying to my face,”

Rain interrupted him, laughing with contempt. He continued,

“As if that sweaty old geezer could possibly father a beauty.”

“General, he’s still the former king of this kingdom! We, well, whatever. But I’m serious. I doubted her identity at first, too, but she really is the Princess and she really is beautiful!”

“Argh, okay, I get it. Then why don’t *you* take charge of her? That should keep you happy, right?”

“Huh? Really? Hooray~wait, no! Even if I wanted to, the Princess herself said that she wanted to meet with you no matter what!”

“With me? Why?”

“How would I know?! She seemed like she knew you from before, though.”

Leni glared at Rain with jealousy in his eyes.

Leni was like an open book. It was obvious that he had taken interest in this princess of his even though Yuri was already the apple of his eye.

“How the hell would I know this princess? You were probably misunderstanding something.”

“I really don’t think I was. It was like, like she was desperate to see you or something.”

“Even if you say that, I really can’t help the fact that I haven’t got a clue about what she wants. Well, either way, I can’t refuse if the Princess says she wants to see me.”

Rain proceeded to leave his room with great reluctance.

Well, he figured that he might as well at least hear her out.

Rain’s attitude seemed to vex Leni, as the latter then, a little forcefully, declared,

“Her beauty will surprise you when you see her.”

“You really think so~? Wanna bet on that?”

“You bet I do! If you still think she’s isn’t beautiful after you see her, I’ll run around the castle a hundred times, naked, doing a handstand, and singing all the way!”

Rain was surprised, to say the least.

To think that Leni, the timid man who boasted his utter lack of self-confidence, would go that far!

Perhaps it really was better to meet her at least once.

He sped up in anticipation and entered the hallway.

If I see her and she looks exactly like King Douglas, I'll make him do exactly what he said he would!

A blonde beauty briskly walked up to him as he made his way for the parlor on the first floor. She was wearing a mauve coat that reached down to her knees and pants of the same color.

Much to Rain's chagrin, it was Senoa. She looked like she was about to scold him again.

"General!"

She called out as soon as she caught sight of him.

She immediately looked angry, and it ruined her pretty face.....as usual.

"Well met, General. There is something that we must discuss at once!"

"Right to the point, as always..... Sorry, but I'm not free right now. Some high-profile guest has called for me, you see."

Rain answered with a steady voice and a straight face. It went without saying that he did not stop moving his feet.

However, Senoa was not one to simply let the matter go at that, so she fell in step with him and snapped,

"And who might this high-profile guest be?"

"It's Her Highness the Princess herself! Isn't that awesome?"

Leni happily followed up in Rain's stead.

.....Not that it matters, but stop bragging about it like some little brat, Rain thought piteously.

“What?! Her, Her Royal Highness the Princess?!”

Senoa stumbled in shock and steadied herself with a hand against the hallway wall. She placed the other on her forehead and looked up at the ceiling in unadulterated astonishment. Her reaction was so overdone that her audience could not help but wonder if she was doing it on purpose.

“W, when did she arrive?”

“Um, just now, actually.....”

Leni answered her in the kindest manner that he could manage, but Rain simply left his two aides behind him and hurried onwards.

Sticking around Senoa inevitably meant having to deal with her nagging, and that was a huge pain. Then, though Rain really should have expected it, he heard someone pursuing him hot on his heels as Senoa caught up to him and fell in step with him again.



And just then, she badgered,

“Why have you neglected to inform me about such an important matter?”

“Look here, I only found out about a few moments ago myself! If you’re going to complain, complain at Leni!”

“General! How could you!?”

Leni wailed.

“In any event. I shall accompany you as well.”

With a sharp glare at Leni, Senoa stated her most inconvenient intentions.

Completely fed up with the situation, Rain stopped in his tracks.

“Suit yourself. We’re already here.”

He raised a hand to knock on the sturdy, iron-enforced door in front of him.....and froze.

Pressure.

Something akin to a sixth sense, that Rain had cultivated though countless battles, sounded a silent warning around him.

The person inside was dangerous.

A surge of power that was stronger than that of any enemy that Rain had ever faced before made the hairs on his neck tingle so much that it hurt.

What is this? The person inside is the Princess, right? But this power.....it might even rival mine. No, it might actually be stronger.

And that wasn’t all.

I've felt this before. I've met someone who emitted the same kind of pressure before. I'd forgotten about it, but I'm sure it was.....

“General, what’s wrong? You’ve frozen solid.”

Rain blinked and regained his composure after Leni peacefully called out to him.

Gently, he put down his hand.

“Hey, Leni..... Senoa, you too. I’m asking just in case, but does the Princess excel at swordsmanship or martial arts? Or magic, even?”

“Huh?”

Leni tilted his head to the side and Senoa looked at Rain as if she had no idea what he was talking about.

Irritated, Rain tried again,

“In other words, is she strong?”

The two aides traded glances.

After a slight pause, Senoa answered,

“Her Highness has almost always been confined to the castle grounds. I have heard that she is learned in academics and etiquette, but I don’t believe that she had ever studied swordsmanship or magic.”

“Hmm.....”

But he could not have possibly been mistaken.

After all, he could still feel the pressure even now. Rain did not doubt his sixth sense. It was the only reason that he was still alive.

“Oh well.”

It was only a matter of entering the room.

There is nothing in this world that I'm afraid of. So why don't we go ahead and see who's inside?

With newfound vigor, Rain raised his fist and knocked on the door.

A young girl turned toward him as he entered the room, her long golden hair dancing nimbly around her.

The girl, who had refused a seat and was standing up to look out the window instead, looked straight at Rain, and only Rain, with her large blue eyes.

Whoa there..... Rain found himself at a loss for words.

He was stunned by how beautiful the girl wearing the frilly white dress was.

Wait a minute. How is that fugly old man with stinky feet the father of this SUPER beautiful girl? She doesn't even look like him!?

And besides.

Rain knit his brows together.

I feel like I've seen this girl before.

Pushing the matter of the intense pressure aside, Rain stared hard at the girl's handsome face.

“.....Rain.”

All of a sudden, tears began to bubble up from the corners of the girl's eyes.

At the verge of tears, she stretched out her trembling hands and began to walk toward him.

“Eh? Umm~, are you Her Highness?”

Rain's hesitant question did not seem to reach the girl's ears.

"I missed you..... I've been wanting to see you for you for so, so long."

The girl drew nearer to Rain, who was still at a complete loss, one step at a time until she finally threw herself into his arms. He felt her soft body press into his chest.

This time, it was Senoa and Leni's turn to freeze up.

Leni, in particular, had both of his arms stretched out like he was waiting for a hug and wore the expression of a kid who had had his candy taken away from him.

--Rain!"

The Princess clung onto him as if her life depended on it.

"Whoa, hold it!! Excuse me, Your Highness, but I think you have the wrong person...?"

Rain said while firmly wrapping his arm around her waist. He took a moment to appreciate how good he had it.

"Rain, don't you remember? It's me. You played with me three years ago....."

The girl finally broke out into a stunning smile and looked up at him.

Three years ago..... He finally remembered after hearing those words. Of the young girl he had met in the garden that had been off-limits, of her melancholy beauty, of the promise they had exchanged.....

The image of the young girl from his memories overlapped with that of the princess in front of him in vivid detail.

"I remember now~! Are you the Little one from back then?"

Rain said in a louder voice than he had meant to.

“Yes, I am! You remember me!”

“Course I do! But man, I hardly recognized you! You’ve become incredibly womanly in just three years, huh. It took me so long to realize it was you!”

Feeling nostalgic, Rain tightly embraced the girl with the intent of welcoming her back to him. She squeezed him back with the arms that she had wrapped around him as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Whoa! Her flat chest filled out quite well over the--

“.....General.”

A voice from the shadows cut Rain’s bliss short. Senoa was glaring at Rain with a steady gaze. She had a hand on the sword at her waist.

As for why she was armed inside of the castle, was a complete mystery.

“May I ask for an explanation of the current situation?”

“You have a really unpleasant aura coming off of you right now, you know.”

“The situation, Sir!”

Her hand, wrapped tightly around the hilt of her sword, began to shake.

She had snapped just as easily as ever.

It was unfortunate, but Rain hastily took his hands off of Michelle.

“Yeah, I’ll explain, so calm down. This girl is an acquaintance of mine, and her name is Michelle.”

“Huh, whaat? Isn’t she Her Highness the Princess?”

Asked Leni, who had finally de-frosted.

“Uh..., nope, not at all. Well, I can guess why she said she was. Michelle probably used the Princess’ name in order to meet me because she couldn’t get into the castle otherwise, am I right?”

“Uh, umm.....”

Michelle timidly tried to interpose.

--With shyly upturned eyes.

Rain smiled and waved his hand in the air and signaled to her not to worry.

“Don’t worry about it, Michelle. If some random guy tried to pull that on me, I’d send them flying, but you’re special. You don’t need to worry about any~thing.”

“N, no, that’s.....”

“It’s fine! A harmless prank or two every now and then is nothing. When I was a kid, I used to be called the ‘emperor of pranks,’ you know?”

“That’s not it!”

Michelle suddenly raised her voice.

Then, with a proper and serious expression, she continued,

“I lied to you, Rain.”

“.....Huh?”

“Please allow me to re-introduce myself with my real name. My name is Shelfa Iras Sunkwooll.....and I am the daughter of the king..... I’m sorry, Rain. I’ve been lying to you this whole time.”

Rain's mind went completely blank.

After staring at her in a daze for a short while, he finally managed to say,

“.....what?”

The atmosphere in the room suddenly grew heavy.

~ ~ * ~ ~ * ~ ~ * ~ ~

He was dreaming.

He was dreaming of crossing swords with a man whose silver hair was long enough to cover an eye. The man was closing in on Rain, who had never known defeat after leaving his hometown, and was close to brining the battle to an end.

No way!

Thought Rain in his dream.

Is this even possible? For me to be cornered this far--

I have to be the strongest. I must not lose to anyone! Never again will I--

However, the silver-haired man ignored Rain's distress and mercilessly brought down his blazing magic sword on Rain. Before long, the crimson blade flooded Rain's field of vision and cut him to pieces.

“--Ugh!”

Rain jolted awake, drenched in sweat.

He found himself in his own bed in his own room, as he always did, and sunlight filtered through the window.

Rain took a moment to grimace while remembering the crappy

nightmare he had just had before shaking his head and climbing out of bed.*It was only just a dream. There's no way I would lose.*

He decisively nodded to himself and headed for his dresser. He changed into his usual ensemble, consisting of a black shirt and black pants, and yawned lightly. He had finally regained his composure.

.....*We're departing tomorrow, after all. I guess I'll at least take things slow for today. I even had some strange dream. I must be more tired than I'd thought I was.*

The lord of a castle was supposed to be busy on a day like this, but Rain, who disliked troublesome things, decided to leave the work to Senoa and conceal his whereabouts from her.

He had Gunther feeding Zarmine false information. The fake orders that Gunther had mixed into all of the orders that the army was receiving from their home country would likely render them immobile for a short while. If everything went as planned, they would meet at the kingdoms' borders.

Rain finished changing while thinking about all of this and looked down at the courtyard from his window after fastening on his magic sword, which had been propped up against the wall.

"Hm. No one's watching."

He nimbly jumped out of his window after briefly making sure that no one was there.

With the agility of a cat, he somersaulted multiple times in the air and landed safely from a six-story jump, which normally would have spelled death for an ordinary man.

"Now, maybe I'll go on a long ride or some.....whoops."

At the edge of Rain's field of vision was a youth, who could have still passed as a child, with his eyes wide open.

Unknown to Rain, the youth was the guard who had initially greeted Shelfa yesterday.

“Yeah, I have this bad habit of automatically excluding men from my field of vision. Ah~ hey, c’mere for a second.”

At Rain’s call, the youth tottered over with his eyes still open wide.

“What’s your name and rank?”

“S, sir! My name is Miran. I’m a squire, General.”

“I see, Miran, was it? Did you see me just now?”

“Yessir, that’s.....”

Rain smiled and tightly clasped Miran’s shoulder.

“Hey, Miran. Let’s talk about scary stories for a bit. I’ll tell you the scariest story I know.”

“No, no thank you, Sir. I don’t really...”

“Just listen, will you?”

Rain silenced Miran, who had stiffened up, with a sharp glint in his eyes and began,

“It’s a story about a certain squire that I know, let’s call him M..... One day, M accidentally learned about a secret of the lord that he served. Then, because he was quite the chatterbox, you know, he happily told someone else that secret.”

Miran began to sweat profusely, despite how cold the weather was.

“A, and what happened to M then?”

He asked, paling. His lips had turned purple.

Rain shook his head in great exaggeration and replied in a

dramatically tragic tone,

“It was such a tragedy, and a scary one too. First, as punishment, M was put on lavatory duty every day, then he was put on gate guard duty for the next five years straight, his wages were halved, and what’s more, his chances of getting promoted had vanished forever. How was it? Scary, right?”

“Ve, very scary, Sir. Extremely scary,”

Said Miran as he nodded, trembling.

His face had gone from pale to ghostly white. Rain looked deeply into his eyes.

Then, in a low voice, Rain said,

“So, let’s go back to the question I asked earlier: did you see anything strange just now?”

“I, I saw the General properly exit the castle from the entrance and nothing else!”

Miran replied on the verge of tears.

“It’s all good and fine as long as you understand. You’ll be a future centurion, M!”

Rain smacked Miran hard across the shoulder before walking away in good spirits, leaving Miran behind in stupefaction.

.....I might be serving under someone totally amazing,

Thought Miran, standing as straight as a pole as he watched his liege lord walk away.

Rain hummed happily to himself as he continued toward the courtyard as if nothing had happened.

Cortecreas Castle had a plumbing system that utilized the water

pressure created by differences in height, but it still also had a well.

He turned around headed for the back of the castle, planning on washing his face before leaving. When he reached the well, however, he found that it already had a visitor.

The girl before him carefully dried off her damp hair with a towel.....her golden hair shone as it danced in the long-awaited dawn.

The snow-white dress she wore suited her well. It was one of the pieces that Rain had his men prepare for her yesterday. Incidentally, her skirt reflected Rain's personal preferences and was rather short.

“Yo, Little one!”

Rain greeted her in a manner that was quite unbecoming of his status as her retainer.

“Rain!”

The girl burst into a smile upon hearing his voice.

With joy permeating through her entire being, Shelfa threw aside her towel and ran up to Rain.

“Good morning! I'm glad that I could see you first thing in the morning.”

“Ye, yeah.”

Even Rain could not help but hesitate at her gleeful words. Her clear sapphire eyes glistened with joy, and her slender hands grasped Rain's without even a hint of her usual timidity.

Did I do something to make her like me so much?

“Umm~, you're technically my liege lord, but is it alright if I treat you the way I did before when we're alone?”

“Something like that..... You don't even need to ask about that.”

A shadow flickered across her smile. She continued,

“Are you still angry with me?”

“Of course not. I’ve already heard about your circumstances regarding that matter, and I really don’t mind anymore. I was just making sure.”

“Thank goodness.....”

“Still, we should still talk like princess and retainer when we’re in the presence of other people. Fortunately, I’m able to sense people’s presences, so it won’t be a problem.”

“I.....”

Shelfa’s long eyelashes followed her gaze downward. She continued,

“I want to speak normally with you at all times, Rain. And, about me taking the place of my father.....”

“We discussed that yesterday too, didn’t we? You’re the first in line to succeed the throne. After all, the former king never had any sons. And the troops need some kind of figurehead to look up to in order to keep up morale. At the very least, I’ll need you to hold out until the fighting is over,”

Rain lightly admonished her as he pulled up the clattering bucket from the well and washed his face.

At his side, Shelfa answered,

“I will bear the weight of the crown as long as you help me, Rain..... But for you to speak to me with such formality--”

“You don’t like it?”

Shelfa gulped and nodded. She looked up at Rain with beautiful, upturned eyes. However, there was nothing that could be done. At the end of the day, Rain was still her retainer.

“Hmm~, that’s a pickle. Oh, I’m borrowing the towel.”

“Uh, umm. I used that just now.”

“It’s fine as long it was you. I don’t mind.”

Rain calmly used the towel to wipe his face. It smelled very good, like the fragrance of flowers.

“Well, let’s rethink the matter about you succeeding the throne and about me being formal to you in front of other people when we’ve taken care of other issues first. There are probably a lot of people who are sitting around eyeing the throne right now. We can just push that problem on them if it gets to that.”

He hung the towel over the edge of the well and looked at Shelfa. She did not look very satisfied with how things stood. Then, he said,

“.....Oh, geez. Quit thinking so hard about it. Oh, I know; why don’t we go on a long ride together for a change of pace?”

“Huh?”

Shelfa looked up in surprise and asked,

“Is it alright for me to go outside?”

“What’s with that? Are you not feeling well or something? Come to think of it, maybe you’re a little too thin? Are you hurting anywhere in particular?”

“Oh, no, that’s not it. I was just surprised because I’ve never really been allowed outside before.”

“--I see.”

Rain nodded deeply and gently placed a hand on Shelfa’s cheek. Her snow-white cheeks flushed pink in an instant. He continued,

“Forget everything that happened to you until now. Alright? You’re

the ruler of this kingdom now. No one can make light of your wishes anymore. You can do whatever you please.”

“In that case, I have a request!”

Eyes sparkling, she continued,

“Is it alright for me to remain at your side, Rain? Is it alright for me to always stay by your side, and never be apart from you?!”

Why did it turn out like this?

Rain was taken aback by the strength of her wish, but he could not bring himself to refuse her at this point, either.

With no other alternative, he said,

“.....If that’s what you wish for.”

“I’m so happy..... I’m truly.....so happy,”

Shelfa muttered as she buried her head into Rain’s chest.

Her voice was overflowing with delight.

Her reaction made even Rain think, *have I agreed to let her do something outrageous, by any chance?*

“Hey, don’t get so happy over something like this. Putting that aside, let’s go for a ride, yeah?”

“Yes, of course. As long you’re with me.”

“Great. Guess I’ll call Kris over.”

Rain placed two fingers in his mouth and let out a loud whistle.

After a short wait.

His partner, Kris, came trotting over.

“Amazing! She came as soon as you called!”

“Well, yeah. That’s ‘cause she’s my partner and all.”

“Her coat is the most beautiful breed I’ve ever seen! It’s pure white.”

Shelfa entertained herself by lovingly running her hands across Kris’ coat. Kris, who was generally hard to please, seemed to take a liking to Shelfa as well, and did not shake the girl off.

It was truly a pleasant scene to watch from behind.....

But then, how do you explain the pressure I’ve been feeling from her?

Rain pondered while watching Shelfa as she was enthralled by Kris.

He remembered it clearly now. He had felt the very same overwhelming strength when he had first met Shelfa in that garden.

He had lowered the volume of his singing in an attempt to figure out and approach the person that the pressure had belonged to, but had let the matter go upon learning that it was a lovely young girl.

He had not paid it any heed back then, but it seemed strange now that he thought about it. It wasn’t as if she had been learned in the ways of the sword (he had asked her about it yesterday), so he could not figure out why the beautiful girl exerted so much pressure.

It’s not possible that she’s hiding her strength on purpose--is it?

It doesn’t seem like she is at all.....

Should I test her out?

Rain put a hand on the hilt of his magic sword and nonchalantly called out to Shelfa,

“Hey, Little one.”

“Yes?”

Shelfa stopped petting the horse and turned around.

There.

Rain purposefully let out a large amount of bloodlust and swung his magic sword so fast that it had become no more than just a blur rushing toward the girl's side. It was a strike that only someone with considerable skill and experience could possibly evade.

The sword left a trail of light that flashed blue like lightning.

“Whoa, there!!”

Unfortunately, she did not react.

Rain managed stopped his blade a paper's width away from the nape of the unsuspecting girl's neck.

Th, that was really close. I almost cut off her head.

He broke out in a cold sweat.

“My. This sword was a magical sword, yes? Are you letting me see it?”

Overflowing with curiosity, Shelfa reached out for the sword with her delicate white hand, without thinking even in her wildest dreams that she had nearly just been killed.

“Whoa! Hey, you can't just touch a blade like that. You'll hurt yourself.”

“Oh.....You're right. I've never held I sword before, so I...”

Shelfa apologized remorsefully.

She probably wouldn't come up and suddenly say, “actually, I'm really quite strong.”

It didn't seem like the mystery would be solved any time soon.

The outskirts of Cortecreas Castle were filled with woods and grassland, with plots of cultivated fields scattered throughout, and didn't really seem like it was the heart of Astel. This was because Claralta, which was supposed to be Astel's castle town, was a bit far away from the castle. Rain had distanced Claralta from the castle on purpose while constructing Cortecreas Castle so that the flames of war would not reach the town if the castle was ever under siege.

An elderly woman stooped over and weeded a field next to the highway so serenely that it almost felt as if the Zarmine threat did not exist.

"It's very peaceful,"

Said Shelfa from in between Rain's arms.

It was an arrangement that had inevitably resulted from the fact that the two of them were riding on Kris together.

They were stuck together like spoons on top of the saddle.

Rain had proposed to get her a horse of her own to ride, but she had wished to ride together with him instead.

She really, really likes me for some reason? thought Rain. *All I did was play with her...*

Then, he had a sudden stray thought,

What would my parents say if I brought her back to the countryside with me?

"Oh, my! This is the first time I've seen a real bonafide princess. Let me bake you some cookies,"was what his mother would probably say.

"You've gone and eloped with a princess...not too shabby, are you?"

his delinquent of a father would say while laughing heartily.

.....Now that I think about it, my parents might be a little strange.

“Rain.....um...”

“Hm? What’s up?”

Shelfa, who was having trouble speaking her mind, brought Rain back to reality.

Then, she spoke of her grave resolution--and in a voice that carried her budding determination, she said,

“Earlier, I said that I wanted to be with you forever..... but from now on, should you determine that we are in danger, I want you to ignore me and save yourself. Your safety is more important to me than anything else, Rain.”

Shelfa calmly spoke of her considerations for Rain.Not that he would ever agree to them.

“Hey, you,”

Rain said, exasperated, and poked at the blond hair just under his eyes.

“.....Ah.”

“Don’t “ah” me. You’re being cheeky, you know.”

Shelfa looked up at him in surprise as Rain gently scolded her. He continued,

“I said that I’d stay by your side, so all you have to do is accept that without saying another word. You have an amazing genius like me right here with you, so why aren’t you relying on me more?”

“But, Rain--”

“No buts. I’d tell you up front if I didn’t like something. So you can rely on me as much as you want as long as I don’t refuse you. You’re different from King Douglass, after all.”

Rain gently hugged her from behind with the hand that was holding the reins. Then, he said,

“Sorry for not saving your old man. I’ll apologize to you and only you about that. If I’d known he was your father, I would have given it a bit more thought.”

“Please, don’t let it weigh on your mind,”

Shelfa said with an expression overflowing with trust as she leaned against Rain’s arms with her delicate frame. Then, she whispered,

“I believe that my father’s death was his own fault. More importantly, I’m so happy that you said I could rely on you.....”

There was not even a hint of hesitation in her voice.

Unable to respond, Rain simply put more strength in the arm he was hugging Shelfa with.

They had come pretty far before they knew it and had been engaged in friendly banter all the way.

They had cleared one forest and yet another one stretched out in front of them. At that moment, a group of men on horseback appeared before them and kicked up a cloud of dust in their wake.

Rain, who had abnormally good eyesight, saw that the men were clad in leather armor, carried longswords at their waists, and generally looked like mercenaries.

The men immediately whipped their horses faster as soon as they spotted Rain and Shelfa. Their bloodlust was so concentrated that Rain instinctively scowled in response.

“One, two, three.....twenty, huh. I wonder who their target is?Or, maybe they’re planning on killing both of us?”

Rain muttered ever so leisurely.

“Rain?”

“Shelfa, we appear to have a few guests.”

“Huh.....?”

Shelfa only noticed the approaching group of men after Rain pointed them out to her. She continued,

“And these people are.....”

“Assassins.”

“Oh no!”

Shelfa stiffened up atop the saddle. It was a natural reaction. Not many people could remain calm while knowing that someone was after their life. She continued,

“Won’t you run away?”

“Nah~. I *could* run away, but I really don’t like the idea of a group of men like that wandering about my territory.”

“But..... I don’t want you to get hurt, Rain.”

“Oh please. There’s no way I’d lose to a bunch of losers who only have numbers going for them.”

“Are you.....certain?”

Shelfa twisted her body around to look up at Rain. Rain, on the other hand, thought that her worry was wholly wasted on him. Thus, he replied arrogantly on purpose,

“Of course I am! If I felt like it, I could easily take on a thousand or so men at once!”

“Oh my.....”

Shelfa opened her already large eyes even wider. Her face was filled with surprise and respect. Her response almost made Rain fall off Kris.

Wait, you believed that?!

I should really think twice before saying anything careless to her..... Oh, well. It's not like I told her a horror story or anything.

But I should probably still warn her otherwise,

“Hey~, Little one.”

“Yes?”

“You know, you really shouldn't trust everything that people tell you.But I'm the exception to the rule, of course.”

“You needn't worry about that. I'm actually quite distrustful of others.”

Shelfa laughed innocently and continued,

“Rain, you are the only one whom I trust from the bottom of my heart.”

“Is, is that so?”

“It is.”

Shelfa nodded resolutely with her body still comfortably nestled against Rain's.

Rain thought that the fact that she did not trust anyone else was a problem in and of itself, but he could not bring himself to criticize her for it after recalling the details of her upbringing. After all, from what

Rain had heard, King Douglas had been rather cold toward his daughter.

“Oh.”

The group of assassins had closed a considerably amount of distance while they had been talking.

Rain brought Kris to a halt and jumped down in one fluid motion.

“Well then, I’ll be right back. Wait here and watch me with Kris, alright?”

“I will,”

Shelfa nodded obediently instead of voicing any further objections.

Then, she took Rain’s hand in her slender fingers and gently whispered heavy words as if they were the most natural thing in the world,

“I wish you luck in battle.I am prepared for what would come next should something happen to you.”

It was only then that Rain understood.

Only then did Rain finally understand just how pure and how deep her feelings for him were.

Geez. --You’re expecting too much from me, Little one.

The men simultaneously dismounted their horses after seeing Rain casually stroll up to them.

They had yet to draw their swords, but the ugly glare in each of their eyes made it clear that they had every intent to do so.

In any case, it was clear that they were not here to make friends.

With a refreshing smile on his face, Rain casually walked up to

them as if he didn't have a care in the world.

When he was close enough that everyone present could see each other's faces, he waved his hand and cheerfully called out,

“Yo! Nice weather today.”

Silence.

The men stared at Rain with suspicious eyes, like stray cats cautiously eyeing a passing human.

There were even some who seemed to want to say, “is this bastard fucking stupid?” One actually turned around to ask,

“Are you sure that it's him?”

“Yeah. That annoyingly brazen smile is definitely the same one that we were shown through Magic Vision,”

Replied a self-important young man at the very back of the group. He had an oily face that looked like it hadn't been washed in a while. He looked like an idiot, but he was probably the leader of the group.

“But he looks pretty young..... Is he really twenty-five?”

Ignoring the man who had voiced his doubts, Rain called out to them,

“Hey, there's something I wanna talk to you guys about. Hear me out without getting upset, alright?”

The entire group glared at Rain as if he was the most insolent creature they had ever met. Still beaming from ear to ear, Rain continued,

“It's true that I'm the strongest in the world, but it's not like I enjoy killing people or anything. And besides, I wouldn't make a single copper even if I killed off all of you. Well, I guess I'd be doing the rest of the world a favor or something.”

Rain cast a cursory glance at each and every man after his eloquent speech. They all looked completely taken aback. He nodded to himself and promptly continued,

“But I’d still prefer not to have to spill any blood today. I don’t know who put you up to this, but this’ll end up as wasted effort on your part. So, why don’t we pretend this never happened, and you can get the heck out of my territory.....and didn’t I tell you not to get upset?”

The looks on the assassins’ faces had changed.

Their bloodlust, which had already been densely concentrated to begin with, grew even thicker.

The man at the forefront of the group spat on the ground.

“Fucking around with us..... Shit’s like you just need to die already.”

Rain withdrew his smile and let out a sigh.

“Actually, I was thinking the exact same thing.”

The very next moment.

Rain’s body abruptly stirred. --Or rather, he became nothing more than a blur.

Rain, who had disappeared from the assassins’ field of vision, closed the distance between them with astonishing speed and suddenly appeared directly in front of them.

By the time the men had processed what had just happened, he was already before their eyes --he had already broken through their ranks.

First, the man standing absent-mindedly at the front of the group was cut diagonally down from the shoulder. The blade of Rain’s sword became an oblique flash of blue light that cut through even the bone with ease.

The man's leather armor had proved to be no more useful than a piece of paper as fresh blood sprouted from his wound.

Before the blood reached the ground, Rain slashed his sword to the left and right and cut through more flesh and left fountains of blood erupting behind him.

Each time Rain swung his sword, it emitted an aura of magic that permeated the space around it and drew a trail of pale blue light in its wake.

It was almost funny how the assassins dropped one after the other like flies. Rain moved too fast for them to make use of their greater numbers.

Not a single man could catch up to Rain as he rushed past them like wind and broke them as if they were merely dolls.

Rain's magic sword glowed like a sinister phantasm and burned the assassins' eyes.

The surviving men gulped and cheeks turned gaunt.

"A, a magic sword?! S, spread out! He's stronger than we th...!"

"You're too slow, dumbass!"

An afterimage suddenly materialized before the eyes of the man who had shouted.

Needless to say, it was Rain.

"--! Gaah!"

By the time the man had raised his sword and warned the others, Rain had already rushed in and pierced him through the heart, ending his life before he could retaliate.

With a flick of his wrist so fast that it was barely a blur, Rain withdrew his sword from the first man and sank a second into the sea

of blood around them.

It was only then that the enemy finally began to move.

Two men burning with rage came at Rain from both sides. They were probably capable mercenaries to begin with. Both men aimed their swords precisely at Rain's vitals and advanced with considerable speed.

However, they had only succeeded in cutting through a fleeting illusion --Rain's afterimage.

Rain had seen through the paths of their swords within a millisecond and had smoothly evaded their fatal strikes.

Their swords harmlessly cut through the air as if they had been repelled by an invisible barrier.

Rain evaded the two longswords with the smallest amount of movement necessary and twirled the magic sword in his right hand.

One was slashed across the throat, and another across his chest, and both men stopped moving and crumbled where they stood.

Next, another challenger jumped into the fray.

"Oraa! --Ugh!!"

When the man's sword missed its target and took him off balance, the blue blade sliced him across the throat and drew out a fountain of blood.

Without pausing to confirm his kill, Rain kept his sword's momentum and swept at another assassin from the side.

"--Gah!"

The man had barely just managed to defend himself with his sword. But, unable to withstand the energy and power of the magic sword, it broke into pieces while smelling of burning metal.

As the broken sword had done little to reduce the force behind the magic sword, it continued straight into the man's chest and mowed him down.

The man fell backwards in a fountain of blood, and a piece of his sword clattered to the ground as if it was chasing after its master.

Then, without even looking back, Rain unleashed a powerful kick to his rear.

His long, extended leg landed hard at the thick throat of the man who had tried to circle behind him --and with a sickening crunch, the man with a freshly broken neck was thrown into the air and landed off to the side of the road.

By that time, however, Rain had already zeroed in on his next prey like the wind.

Rain moved between twenty assassins as if he was dancing. Each time his magic sword whistled through the air, someone screamed or burst into a fountain of blood and fell.

The men were at their wit's end. They could not keep up with Rain's movements, so they could not even begin to make use of their greater numbers.

Their opponent was simply too fast for them to surround, despite the fact that the road was more than wide enough for them to do so.

Rain surpassed them in speed, physical strength, and even grit. At that point, their skirmish could barely even be called an actual fight.

Furthermore, Rain did not look even the least bit nervous.

Although they did not want to admit it, the men realized that Rain was still taking it easy.

Their numbers had been reduced to half in the mere ten seconds it had been since the skirmish had begun.

“Ugh! And we prepared a large number of men just for this commission..... Is this guy a monster?!”

Although he had been pretending to oversee the battle from horseback with the airs of a lofty leader, the confusion in his voice betrayed the oily-faced man’s internal panic.

Infected by their leader’s fear and cowardice, the assassins that had been fighting with determination suddenly drew back. The stole glances amongst each other with pallid faces.

“Hey, what’s wrong? You guys got real quiet all of a sudden.”

Instead of pressing his advantage, Rain swung his magic sword over his shoulder and yawned. He wasn’t even out of breath from the fighting. Thus, the assassins were made to witness his unbelievably inexhaustible stamina. Then, he continued,

“I’m still willing to overlook this, you know. I’ll give you one more chance, so hurry up and scram.”

“The, the fuck are you saying?! Don’t act all high and mighty just ‘cause you got yourself a magic sword. Hey, hurry up and attack him already!”

However, only the leader responded with such ferocity, as the other men appeared to hold a different opinion. The rest of the men slowly backed away from Rain.

Then, Rain said,

“Oh, okay then. Well, who am I to stop you if you wanna die so badly?”

He advanced towards them as soon as the words left his mouth, and the men turned around and sprinted for their horses with commendable speed the very moment he took his first step.

“Huh?! H, hey! What the hell are you guys doing?! Get back; get

your asses back here!”

None of the men responded to their leader’s shouts, and instead they promptly fled on their horses without a second glance. Of all the things, even the horses of the dead joined in on the escape because they had been frightened by the tumult.

All that was left was the oily-faced man, who had lost both a means to escape and had been abandoned by his men.

“Ahhhhhh--!!”

The man’s pitiful voice echoed around him.

“Now, what to do with you?”

Rain smiled devilishly at the flustered oily-faced man.

The oily-faced man grew deathly pale. Sweat poured down his face in a comical manner as he desperately averted eyes.

He gulped and said in a quiet voice,

“Do, don’t get mad..... We never meant any harm.”

“Never meant any harm? Are you delirious? You must really have a death wish, huh?”

Rain lifted his magic sword high into the air.

“Waah! Wait, don’t be rash. Let’s talk this out! I’ve done nothing wrong. There was a co, commission from the prime minister of Zarmine. And then..... ah.”

The oily-faced man, now drenched in sweat, suddenly spaced out. His small eyes widened as he gazed over Rain’s shoulder.

“Rain! Are you unhurt?”

When Rain warily turned around, he found Shelfa, following

closely behind Kris, walking over to him while trying to ignore the corpses littering the ground.

“Hey. I thought I asked you to wait for me.”

“I’m sorry. But Kris just started to walk, so..... Nevertheless, Rain, you’re so very strong.”

Shelfa looked up at him with respect.

For the time being, it seemed that her admiration had overcome her fear.

“Well, yeah. I’m a genius after all.”

Rain broke out into a sudden smile and instinctively brushed back his hair.

“.....This girl; who is she?”

The oily-faced man asked with zeal, throwing a wet blanket on Rain’s mood.

“She has nothing to do with you! She’s never had anything to do with you, and she won’t have anything to do with you from here on out, either. Stop looking at her like that; you’ll taint her with your ogling!”

“Y, you didn’t have to go that far!”

“Yes, I did! And besides, are you really in any kind of position to ask me questions, huh!?”

Rain pressed his sword against the man’s throat, causing him to tremble and attempt to raise his hands in surrender. Only then did he realized that he was still holding onto his sword and threw it away in a panic.

He shot both of his hands into the air.

“I get it! Please, forgive me! I was really only doing what I was told. It was the prime minister; he submitted a commission through the assassin’s guild--he’s the bad guy behind all of this!”

“.....Tell me more.”

“I, I took the job only just the other day. According to the prime minister, the assassination order was directed by King Leygur. So, the order really came from King Leygur. I’m not lying!”

“Hmph. This King Leygur of yours must be real piece of work to come after me even though he’s a guy. He’s a hundred years too early for that, I do say so myself.”

Rain frowned.

“King Leygur plans.....to assassinate Rain.....”

Immediately worried, rather than shocked, by the revelation, Shelfa clung onto Rain’s arm. Rain smiled back at her in an attempt to tell her not to worry. After all, it was not the first time that someone had targeted his life.

“Hey, aren’t you done with me? Just let me go already.”

“You’re pretty shameless, aren’t you? You *could* just accept your death like a real man.....oh.”

Rain stopped and looked toward the forest in front of him mid-sentence and furrowed his brows.

There was another cloud of dust. A new group of ten people or so were galloping toward them.

“Ha~! Hahaha!”

Laughed the oily-faced man who had been revitalized the moment he saw it too.

His previous look of sycophancy had been wiped off of his face and

with his chest puffed out with pride he said,

“Look, they’re on my side! I prepared more men than what the prime minster ordered me to just in case. How d’you like that?!”

“Are you stupid?”

Rain flatly shot back. He continued,

“Twenty people couldn’t stand up to me just now, so what good do you think another ten will do?”

The oil-faced man lost his short-lived confidence as Rain talked. He seemed to have realized that Rain had a point.

“Geez. What’s with the gross sausage feast on this fine morning? I can’t take this anymore. Maybe I’ll just use a secret skill.....”

Spat out Rain, visibly fed up with the situation, as he removed himself from Shelfa’s grasp and swung his magic sword high above his head.

Then, he swung his sword directly down, ignoring the confusion his movements caused in the girl and man besides him.

The magic sword released a bluish white aura as it etched a trail of light in its path.

For an instant, it looked as if the sword had rent asunder the very space itself--and in that very same moment, some of the men from afar slumped over backwards on their horses.

It was as if they had taken a direct hit from the blade.

Several of the oncoming assassins fell from their horses while spewing blood.

The remaining men stopped their horses in a panic. They looked around their surroundings in abject confusion.

“That was me. Get with the program already, fools.Guess I’ll have to do it one more time.....one, two~, and...”

Rain swung his sword down again while talking as if he was just messing around, and one of the remaining assassins slumped backwards and fell off of his horse like the others had before him. Finally, they understood that it had been Rain’s doing.

After pointing fingers at Rain and striking up a heated conversation amongst themselves for a short while, they turned tail and ran away.

“You should have done that from the start,”

Mumbled Rain as if nothing had happened. Unlike the calm and composed Rain, Shelfa and the oily-faced man had the blood drained from their faces. They had come to realize the magic sword’s identity was with that last attack.

“A ra, ranged attack..... That, that sword..... cou, cou, could it, cou, could...”

“What are you, a rooster? Or were you trying to ask me if this is the Siren’s Blade? If so, then yes, it is.”

“H, how can you be so calm about that?!”

The oily-faced man’s bearded visage distorted with fear.

He pointed at Rain, who stood before him as if nothing was wrong, with a shaking finger.

“Don’t you know how fucking dangerous that sword is?! Where the hell did you even get it?!”

“It’s not like I’m telling *you* to use it. Get a grip on yourself, would you?”

Said Rain, decidedly ignoring the man’s questions.

--The blade lacked an official epitaph.

There were no records of who had imbued the sword with magic.

The sole remaining record of the blade dated back to at least a thousand years ago.

At that time, a small kingdom called “Celestia” had flourished in the deserts at the center of the continent.

It was a small city-state with a population of about five thousand, but it prospered and thrived around the oasis at the kingdom’s heart.

That is, until one scorching summer day.

That day, a single man stepped foot into the peaceful kingdom of Celestia.

Even to this day, the reason behind his faithful visit to the peaceful kingdom remains a mystery.

Regardless of his reasons.....the man, whose eyes were soulless and devoid of life, had begun to slaughter the inhabitants of Celestia without warning.

In his hands was a magic sword enveloped in a magical blue aura.

The magic sword, which carried the fearsome power to attack anything that entered its wielder’s line of sight no matter how far away it was, displayed its power to its heart’s content that day. All who had tried to stop it fell before the evil blade, until even the elite royal knights were drawn out of the palace.

Although they had eventually succeeded in slaying the slaughterer, over a thousand innocent lives were lost that day according to the legend.

Of course, it was possible that the numbers in the legend had been exaggerated. Regardless, it could not be denied that countless people had died.

Furthermore, the crown prince of Celestia, who had commanded the royal knights, numbered among the dead.

After losing his only son, the king, who had once been renown as a wise sage, sank into despair and died of madness.

The king's lineage died out soon afterwards. But, Celestia's misfortune only continued. Civil war broke out ravaged and the lands, and before long, she had fallen to hands of savage tribes that raided the weakened kingdom.

The once beautiful city was burned to the ground and would never rise again.

.....Later on. The people began to revere the sword that had destroyed a kingdom with awe and fear and called it thus: the "Siren's Blade."

Rain had come across this infamous sword, which had been thought lost to the pages of history, in some underground ruins several years earlier.....

"Y, you're something else! Ahh, if I'd known that I'd be up against a guy like you, I wouldn't have messed with you no matter how many people I had with me!"

Cried the oily-faced man.

His face was twisted in a mixture of fear and regret.

"I don't care, idiot,"

Said Rain, cutting off the man's protests. He continued,

"And more importantly, do you really think I'll let you go home just because you asked? My magic sword thirsts for blood, y'know?"

Rain brought the bluish-white sword, which was buzzing like the sound of flying insects, up against the oily-faced man's throat.

The threat was exceptionally effective, and the oily-faced man began to sweat profusely once more.

“P, please, help me! I really don’t know anything more than what I’ve already told you! I have eight, no, fifteen kids waiting for me back at home. Let me go; please, I’m begging you!!”

“Would you listen to this guy? Spewing out cheesy clichéd lines like it’s nothing.”

Rain raised his sword again in a huff. He continued,

“Besides, your math doesn’t add up! You must really wanna die, don’t you?!”

“Ahh! N, no! There’s one set of triplets, and, and several pairs of twins--”

“Shut up already! Just shut up and go to Hades like a man!”

“He, help me---!!”

The oily-faced man sprang up, turned his back toward Rain, and ran for his life.

He may have had some skill, but he was much too blithe.

After gaining some distance, the oily-faced man began to run in a zigzag. He had probably remembered to be wary about Rain’s ranged attack. Still, his futile attempts were meaningless before the Siren’s Blade’s “invisible slash.”

The only way to evade it was to get incredibly lucky while dodging right before it hit.

“He’s quite the funny guy.”

Rain returned his sword to its sheathe instead of finishing the man off and looked at Shelfa.

A pair of anxious eyes looked back at him.

Two beautifully arched eyebrows were furrowed in worry.

“What’s wrong, Little one?”

“It’s alright, right? Please tell me it is so!”

“Huh?”

Before answering, Shelfa reached out for Rain and nestled close to him.

“Even if the enemy king is after you, even if you carry the Siren’s Blade, you’ll be fine, right? You won’t get hurt or anything? Right?You won’t leave me all alone?”

“.....Don’t be silly. ‘Course I won’t. As if I’d lose to the likes of them. And relax. Even this sword depends on its wielder. There’s no sin in the sword itself.”

“.....I’ll have faith in your words.”

Shelfa looked up and smiled after some time had passed. Then, she asked,

“Rain, would you please teach me swordsmanship sometime?”

“Eh?Why?”

“I don’t ever want to become a hindrance to you, Rain. As long as I am here, I want to become a girl who is worthy of being at your side,”

Said Shelfa, her voice ringing as clear as two glasses clinking together.

She got me good.

Rain found himself at a loss of words, which was rather out of

character for him, as he wrapped an arm around Shelfa's thin waist.

.....Am I really someone worthy of receiving such pure and sincere words from her? I'm just a hopeless guy who spent his entire life only trying to become stronger.

"Rain?"

"Uh, yeah. I'll teach you. But you need to learn how to cook in exchange. A girl who can't even cook is quite the calamity, after all."

"Yes, definitely. I'll work hard so that I won't even lose to you."

".....Whoa there; do you really think that someone like me works hard?"

Rain asked with a bit of a start.

Shelfa simply looked back at him with gentle eyes.

"I have never once doubted your genius ability, Rain. But I also believe that you've also gone through a lot of difficult training."

Shelfa grabbed his hands in both of hers the moment that Rain had opened his mouth to protest. She continued,

"When I first met you and I held your hand like this the for the first time, I wondered, "why is his hand so hard?"I only understood later on. It was because of all of the blisters and callouses you had accumulated, is it not? Because you were always swinging your sword..... That's why your palms had become so hard.Am I wrong?"

"To be at a complete loss for words'. Rain finally understood what the phrase truly meant.

It was exactly as she had said, and he had no room to convince her otherwise.

He just barely managed to keep his posture together, and at the

same time she had said, “I’ll work hard, too,” he replied,

“Don’t let your soft hands get hard like mine, silly. I’d get sad when I hold them.”

It was the only retort that he could muster.

Geez, this girl is just as special on the inside as she is on the outside. She might even have the right qualities to be a true ruler.

“You’re really something, you know that, Little one?”

“Eh?”

Shelfa tilted her head to the side in an adorable manner. Rain continued,

“Nah, don’t worry about it. Shall we head back now? It’s just about time for Senoa to throw a huge fuss.”

“Yes.”

Shelfa nodded with a bright smile on her face and briskly made her way back to where Kris was.

Watching over her graceful frame, Rain voicelessly said to himself,

If the pressure that you give off is an indicator of your latent abilities...

...You are the real genius, Shelfa.

--And not a sham like me.

Chapter 5 - Decisive Battle

King Leygur had already cut down a multitude of criminals by the time that Prime Minister Jagil had stepped foot into the execution grounds.

As usual, the criminals were allowed their own weapons and were baited into battle with the promise of freedom. This was probably Leygur's idea of training. Jagil thought that his king had horribly bad taste.

And, as always, the battle ended in King Leygur's absolute victory.

A countless number of corpses littered the circular execution grounds, which were surrounded by a high wall, and the last criminal was standing before the king, trembling. The stench of blood filled the air.

Without even sparing Jagil a second glance, the king quietly said to the criminal,

"What's wrong; hurry up and come at me. I know that you are the most capable of this group. That's why I purposefully saved you for last."

"Y, you..... what on earth....."

"What am I, you ask?"

Allowing his sword arm to drop to his side, Leygur cracked a slight smile while watching the pallid man attempt to catch his breath. He continued,

"Hahaha..... Soon enough, the entire continent will know of my true identity. You would do well to watch that happen from Hades."

Leygur silently jumped in front of the man's eyes the moment the

words left his mouth.

His magic sword hummed as it drew an arc in the air. It was ominously red in color.

With the first strike, the man's sword arm danced into the air, and when Leygur's tall figure circled back for the second, the man's head followed his arm with ease.

Unable to even begin to show any signs of counterattacking, the man's freshly severed head fell to the ground with a look of surprise etched on his face. His bloodshot eyes stared up at the aged prime minister in resentment.

It was the most that Jagil could do to resist the urge to fall to his knees.

Only then did Jagil realize that someone outrageous had become his new king.

--What is it, Jagil? Don't simply stand there."

"Yes, Your Majesty,"

Jagil hoarsely responded to his master, who stood with his back to him as always. He continued,

"P, please forgive me. Rain's assassination attempt ended in a failure. The report came in just now."

He collapsed to the ground and prostrated himself.

He did not dare to even lift his head.

"Oh? We sent in so many men, but they still failed?"

There was an unexpected touch of vivacity in Leygur's quiet response.

Even still, Jagil kept his head on the ground as his king continued,

“Hmm..... I see that it was not merely an irresponsible lie. Shall I test it out and see for myself.....? Whether or not my greatest enemy exists even in this closed-off world?”

Surprisingly--The king began to laugh quietly as he delivered his exaggerated and clichéd lines.

He sounded like he was having fun, as if he was eagerly waiting for something to come.

~~*~~*~~*~~

-Back at Sunkwoll.-

The army that Rain commanded, which was three thousand strong if you included the reserves and the new recruits, was set to depart from Cortecreas Castle the day after the assassination attempt.

Rain had generously proclaimed that, “anyone who doesn’t want anything to do with this fight may remain here,” but no one in his army had requested to stay behind.

Despite the magnitude of the battles to come, Rain had already proved his strength to his men in battle, and, unbeknownst to the man himself, many of his men followed him because he was their ideal leader.

The army, centered around Rain, was completely in sync despite the fact that it was comprised of almost three thousand men. Far removed from any sort of gloom or pessimism, the army marched with a sense of security and reached Ralphus’ castle, Starhill Castle, in a few days. Needless to say, their objective was to rendezvous with Ralphus.

Starhill Castle was located to the south of the capital, and was only half a day away from Galfort Castle by horse.

The very fact that he owned territory here proved that Ralphus had held the trust of the late king. It was a huge difference from Rain,

who had been tossed away to the rural borderlands like a nuisance.

During their march towards the castle that rested atop a small hill and oversaw its castle town, Rain had conversed with Shelfa, who rode next to him.

However, he had spoken in a quiet voice.

“Sorry about this, Little one. For making you dress up like that and all.”

He was referring to her hooded robe, which covered her up so completely that it was impossible to even see her face.

Rain had decided to keep Shelfa a secret for the time being.

“Not at all, Rain,”

Shelfa replied in an equally quiet voice. She continued,

“I’m sure you know what you’re doing. I have faith in you, Rain.....”

“.....Thanks. You’ll understand soon enough.”

Unfortunately, his reason was a bit hopeless--

Eventually, they finished climbing up the path carved into the green hill, and the castle spread out before Rain and his men.

Without even bothering to celebrate their reunion, Rain asked Ralphus to gather both armies into the great hall the minute he had arrived.

Then, he disappeared into a separate room with the Princess.

“It’s gotten pretty busy here all of a sudden. I wonder what Rain is trying to do? Him and Her Highness both...”

Ralphus found himself in the awkward situation of being at a loss

within in his own great hall.

The great hall was three stories tall, and anyone inside of the castle had to cross it at least once. Essentially, it served as the castle entrance.

Engraved on the ceiling, which was so high up that it hurt just to look at it, was a mural of the goddess of battle with multi-colored hair, Myusra, whom the knights of Sunkwoll put their faith in.

Close to the wall on either side were cloisters that led to the second floor.

And at their feet, the entire floor was made out of shiny, polished marble that reflected the surface almost as well as a mirror.

It was generally a quiet place despite the everyday pedestrian traffic, but at the moment it was jam-packed with knights from both armies.

“Well, it’s hard to know what the General is up to sometimes. Though he did say that it had something to do with raising morale,”

Said Leni, who stood at Ralphus’ side. He was so casual about it that it was difficult to believe that he was Rain’s aide sometimes.

“Raising morale? That’s a good thing, if it’s true. Everyone is anxious about facing a strong enemy.”

“Yeah, I guess. But it’s probably best not to get your hopes up.”

“This isn’t the time to be doing something like this!”

Said Senoa. Her beautiful golden hair was disheveled, and she looked like she was about to start stomping her feet in frustration. She continued,

“Our duty is to march towards the Zarmine army at once and show them justice! And yet...!”

She stomped down her foot. Then, perhaps because she had stomped a little too hard, she scowled.

“And what on earth is the General doing alone with Her Highness?!”

This was what she really seemed to want to get off her chest.

“My point exactly~. Aren’t they so~ suspicious~?”

Said a cutesy girl with her black hair cut evenly across the nape of her neck that Ralphus had never seen before in an irritating tone of sycophancy.

“.....Leni, who is she?”

Ralphus asked quietly.

“Oh, her name’s Yuri. She became a squire recently because her father and the General’s father knew each other.”

“Oh?”

After listening to Leni’s happy explanation, Ralphus found himself admiring Rain for his knack of befriending women. He was completely oblivious to the fact that he too was rather popular with the fairer sex.

Then, Ralphus’ aide Gwen, who had stood around doing nothing for a while, turned his thick neck and said, “oh, it’s him,” in a deep, throaty voice. Even Nigel, who was also standing around inconspicuously, had narrowed his eyes to stare at the person in question.

“...? What is it?”

When Ralphus turned around, he saw Gunther walking through the great hall’s giant, rectangular entrance while carrying a large crate with a sullen look on his face.

As always, he went about looking as if something bad had happened to him. It was as if he hated the entire world and everything in it.

“What is that crate for, Gunther?”

Ralphus called in a hurry before Gunther could slip away.

“This is the ‘Morale-Boosting Item No. 1,’”

Gunther replied curtly.

Then, he made to leave.

“What? Hold on a minute!”

Ralphus chased after him. Leni and the others followed him like ducklings.

We’ve been together for over ten days, but I still don’t know what this man’s deal is--

Ralphus lamented as he picked up his pace.

In any case, the man was unsociable. He never started conversation and would only reply with curt, short answers if talked to, as if he couldn’t be bothered to continue.

He seemed to be completely loyal to Rain, but Ralphus couldn’t help but wonder what sort of common ground he had with his master, who generally disliked men.

Ignoring Ralphus’ musings, Gunther kept walking with his head held high until he reached the wall near the entrance and dropped the crate upside-down with a bam.

“Isn’t this..... an apple crate?”

Pointed out the girl called Yuri, who had immediately began examining the crate, in confusion.

“You can find crates like this laying around the cellar of any castle.
.....And this one was filled with apples,”

Nigel nodded in agreement.

“I don’t get it. What’s so special about this one?”

Asked Gwen as he threw a suspicious glance at Gunther.

In response, Gunther, without a shred of amiability, replied,

“Regardless of what it used to be, it is now the ‘Morale-Boosting Item No. 1.’”

“Y, ya know...”

Gunther cut off Gwen mid-sentence by pointing towards the staircase, deftly avoiding the latter’s irritation.

“Morale-Boosting Item No. 2 has arrived.”

Everyone, starting with Ralphus, turned to look at the staircase.

--And they were rendered speechless.

All traces of noise disappeared from the great hall and only silence remained.

Rain and the Princess were slowly and gracefully climbing down the staircase that had been covered with a blue carpet.

As usual, Rain was clad head to toe in black.

Princess Shelfa on the other hand, wore a pure white dress..... The dress was lavished with frills and lace, and she looked elegant in it. Her attire was accented by a pink rose that rested slightly above her blossoming bosom.

Which was lovely and all, except that her skirt was rather short.

It appeared that Rain's plan was to raise morale, which had been stagnated for quite some time, to an all-time high in one go by dressing up the sheltered princess and putting her on stage for all to see (though her stage was an apple crate).

Rain, you sly fox!

Ralphus groaned to himself.

No normal knight would even dream of doing something as outrageous as this.

Well, it's certainly something he would do, to say the least.

In the face of Ralphus' reproachful glaring, Rain kept his head down as he escorted the princess and stood beside the crate. He then drew close to her and whispered something in her ear.

After a brief moment of hesitation, the princess stepped onto the crate.

A silent commotion immediately stirred across the great hall.

Hardly anyone had seen Princess Shelfa in person up until now.

It went without saying for Ralphus' men, but even most of Rain's men had never seen the princess before because she had kept her face hidden throughout the entire march.

The knights gathered in the great hall (who were mostly men) were thoroughly captivated by her beauty and were stupefied.

"Alright, listen up everyone! Standing before you is the daughter of the late king, Her Royal Highness Princess Shelfa! Naturally, she's also the next person in line for the throne. Our new master is about to greet us, so listen well!"

Ralphus suddenly felt faint after seeing Rain shout out so brightly.

~~*~~*~~*~~

“Um.....I...”

Shelfa began to speak in a fragile and unsteady voice. Her words died off as if she had become overpowered by the combined weight of the numerous eyes that rested on her.

She immediately looked at Rain, seeking rescue. Rain simply smiled in silence and gave her a slight nod.

They looked at each other for a short while.

It was as if the princess was drawing some sort of invisible strength from Rain’s black eyes.

Then, Shelfa straightened up and began once more.

“I am not someone who has the capacity to become a ruler, and neither do I have the ability to do so. I am merely an ignorant little girl. I am sure that there are some among you who feel discontent with me becoming the representative of your kingdom.”

The princess paused to survey the great hall. All was silent. Everyone, including Ralphus, had their eyes fixed upon the beautiful girl.

They were loath to miss even a single word from their new master.

After another quick glance at Rain, Shelfa continued her speech.

“I am more aware of my own shortcomings than anyone else. That’s why, instead of being here to issue orders, I am here before you to fulfill my final duty.

I believe that there is meaning in the fact that I am here today, despite my incompetence. Surely, mine is a duty that somebody must carry out.”

Her voice steadily grew louder, perhaps due to the strength that she had received from Rain, or perhaps because she finally began to tap

into the strength hidden in her own heart.

Her serene soprano reached every corner of the wide hall.

At that very moment, the strength and charm that Shelfa had always carried within her had been revealed for all to see.

“Please believe me when I say that I do not intend to let you bear the danger by yourselves.

I cannot fight with a sword. I have never held a sword in my life. Neither do I believe that I could lessen the burden that you bear if I tried.

Still, I will go to battle with all of you.

Because I believe that such is the duty of a ruler.

And yet, I hold neither fear nor anxiety in my heart. Because, from the bottom of my heart, I believe that this battle will end with our victory!

I am sure that there are many of you who do not share my belief right now, and I cannot blame you for it. But still, I--”

Shelfa surveyed the knights gathered before her with a warm smile.

Then, she gently extended her hands.

It was as if she was trying to gather everyone into her arms.

“On the other hand, I have readied my resolve.

Should the unthinkable happen, should we fail to emerge victorious, I will be here. The ruler of Sunkwoll will be here!

I believe that rulers exist precisely for times as such. Even I, as unfit to be a ruler as I am, am determined to fulfil my duty as should such a time arise.

That's why I implore you -please fight without hesitation.I'll say it again: I do not intend to let you bear the danger by yourselves.”

A strained atmosphere hung over the great hall.

Although she had not spelled it out for them, everyone present understood that the young girl was willing to offer up her head to the enemy if necessary.

--In exchange for the lives of those who had survived the battle.

Shelfa gently continued her speech as she looked down at the knights who waited for her words with baited breath.

She spoke without a trace of exhilaration or tragedy.

“But I do not think that such times will ever come to pass.....no, I know it will not!

Now, with our entire kingdom united for the first time, we will surely seize victory from Zarmine.

Once this painful battle is over, then surely, surely, there will come a time when I can talk to all of you again.

So please, do not die until that time comes. This is my only request.....”

After concluding the speech that she had poured her whole being into, Shelfa surveyed her audience once more.

Then, she slightly bowed her head.

By the time she had resurfaced, Shelfa had returned from being a ruler to being an ordinary, embarrassed girl.

With her cheeks still flushed pink, she took Rain's hand and hurried off the wooden create.

The great hall remained silent even after she had left.

But then--

Someone raised a strange cry. It sounded something like, “Uwooooh!”

Starting with that shout, the great hall began to fill with cheers and applause.

People stomped their feet, clapped their hands with tears streaming down their faces, or simply shouted at the top of their lungs..... What they had in common was that each and every one of them was extoling Princess Shelfa.

“Damiiiiit!!! I’m goin’ ta fight! I’ll never hand over Her Highness to the likes of them Zarmine scum!”

After hearing a familiar voice shout right by his ear, Ralphus turned around in surprise to confirm that the voice that indeed belonged to Gwen.

Overcome with emotion, Gwen raised a fist into the air and continued to roar, “I’m goin’ ta fiiiight!” The great hall was overflowing with knights like Gwen, creating an uproar that could not be summed up as a simple increase in morale.

Rain had hit the nail right on the head. Then again, he always did.

I see, he really did boost morale, Ralphus thought with a wry smile.

He was the only one who had not been caught up in the frenzy.

An elated Rain arrived before him together with the princess. She still looked embarrassed by all of the praise that she was receiving.

Bothered by the length of her skirt, she subconsciously pulled down at its hem. Well, it probably bothered her because she was more used to wearing long skirts that dragged behind her.

Then, Rain, looking happier than he had ever been, declared,

“How about it; Shelfa’s--no, the Princess’ rally was exceptionally effective, wasn’t it?”

“.....Rain, you...”

“Whoa, let’s not do any fault-finding here. At the end of the day, it was effective. Oh, and just so you know, I had nothing to do with the content of her speech.”

“Even still..... Well, whatever.”

Ralphus gave the princess a light bow and brought the matter to a close. There were more pressing matters at hand. He wanted to ask about Rain and the princess’ relationship, but decided to shelve that issue until after they survived the war.

“Rain, a minute.”

Ralphus invited Rain over to a corner of the great hall. Gwen and the others followed behind him.

“Hey! The rest of ya are supposed to be gettin’ ready to march!”

Yelled Gwen, chasing away the other knights who attempted to tag along.

When the other knights had left, Ralphus got straight to the point and asked,

“As for what comes next.....do you have a plan?”

“Heh, well y’know...”

“Ooh me me me!”

Yuri interrupted without restraint.

She was hopping up and down with both hands in the air. She was

a rather lively girl who acted without reserve.

“You’ve a pretty big attitude for a squire, don’t you……whatever, say your piece,”

Said Rain as he jabbed a finger at her in exasperation.

“Hehehe. Well, since there’s a huge difference in numbers, I think we should hole up here in this castle and wait until the enemy gives up and withdraws~”

Rain’s handsome face twisted into a frown as he stared down at Yuri and curtly ordered,

“Go back to the countryside and pick flowers or something, dimwit.”

“Ehh~, why? I thought it was a good idea.”

Yuri puffed out her cheeks in crushing disappointment.

“Holding a castle is a viable strategy only on the premise that you’ll be getting reinforcements from somewhere else,”

Ralphus interjected and explained, feeling a little sorry for the girl. She turned around with a surprised look on her face as he continued,

“The other high generals’ troops have been wiped out, so we won’t be getting any reinforcements. We couldn’t hold the castle even if we wanted to.”

“……Oh, is that how it works?”

Yuri nodded.

“Exactly, so you should hold your tongue.”

This time, Senoa stepped forward. Ignoring Yuri, who had begun to sulk, she took a look at everyone present and continued with conviction in her voice,

“The Zarmine army is large! It would be ill-advised to face it head on.”

Even Ralphus was surprised as she stressed her point.

He had thought that she would advocate for a more assertive approach. Rain, similarly surprised, said, “that it is, I’m glad you get it.”

“But of course I do.”

With a blush on her face (because she was getting excited), Senoa took another step towards Rain.

Ralphus, Gwen, Nigel, Yuri, Rain, and the princess waited for her next words with bated breath. Rain even looked serious. Only Gunther continued on as sullenly as usual.

Then, after straightening up, Senoa said with a dignified expression,

“And yet, a true knight would face such a powerful enemy without any fear! As long as we are courageous, we will surely be able to bring down the iron hammer of justice upon our invaders! And should it be necessary, I will personally rip the enemy apart and tear them to pieces!”

“Shut up, you godforsaken idiot!”

Rain said as he hit Senoa on the head with his scabbard (with his heavy magic sword still inside).

Senoa wobbled and fell to the ground while holding her head.

“Tch, and here I was expectin’ somethin’ great and all,”

Gwen muttered as Nigel sighed next to him. Then, Rain delivered the final blow and lamented,

“Is that really it? Ugh, you’re useless. Now *I* want to go back to the countryside.”

He sounded like he actually meant it.

Before anyone else could present their extraordinary opinions, Ralphus spoke up and said,

“I’d like to hear your plan, Rain, rather than anyone else’s. You have one, don’t you?”

Rain smiled in displeasure.

“There are two ways to force a large army to retreat without engaging them in battle. Do you know what they are?”

“One is to defeat their commander. The other is to rob them of their provisions,”

Ralphus replied without missing a beat.

“Exactly! Much better than the likes of Senoa or Yuri,”

Rain happily praised his friend before turning to the ever-reticent Gunther and asked,

“How are things coming along?”

“Milord. According to the reports I received through Magic Vision, my men have completed their preparations,”

Gunther answered readily.

“Alright, then we’ll be marching soon.”

“Hey, Rain. You never told us what your plan was.”

“You don’t get it?..... Basically, we’re using both of methods you mentioned simultaneously,”

Said Rain as he finally began to explain the details of his plan.....

~~*~~*~~*~~

Afterwards, Rain and Ralpus' joint army marched without rest and set up camp upon reaching the northern border in just three days.

They were near the former border to Lunan, and a vast plain stretched out before their eyes. Highlands extended to their east and west, though they were rather low in terms of elevation, so the enemy would most likely march towards them.

The joint army was lined up against a river that ran along the border, called the Jigrem River.

Just a day later, as they had predicted, the Zarmine army appeared from the horizon heralded by thunderous rumbling.

The Zarmine army spread out and formed their battle lines immediately after realizing that the Sunkwoll army was already waiting and ready for them. They lined up like an arrowhead pointed toward their foe, and their brilliant performance showcased how much they had trained. They were brimming with the will to attack.

Including reserves, the Zarmine army roughly numbered a little more than forty thousand.

Surprisingly, this number surpassed the total population of Sunkwoll's capital city, Lydia.

On the other hand, the Sunkwoll army had scraped up every rank and file soldier they could find but still barely numbered seven thousand. Not to mention that Rain and Ralpus were the only high generals present.

In truth, a few other high generals still yet remained, but they had long since fled from the castles that they had been appointed to hold during the war.

The only reason that Rain and Ralpus' men did not flee was because their men trusted and idolized them.

Well, I guess we made it in time. It would've been bad if we couldn't meet the enemy here,

Thought Rain, a little relieved, as he sat on top of Kris.

In order to carry out his plan, they had to intercept the enemy here--at this exact location.

It was fortunate that Gunther's false information had spread so well and that the Zarmine army had advanced slower than anticipated. While he had backup plans ready, he was glad that the groundwork that Gunther (or rather, Gunther's men) had laid out had not gone to waste.

Get a load of this, Leygur. I'll make you regret the fact that you failed to kill me.

Rain smiled fearlessly from his horse.

Despite the fact that he was headed to war, he was still in his all-black ensemble and hadn't even put on armor. His attitude, which could make one doubt how serious he was about the war, was brazen enough to exasperate others.

Anyone who didn't know the truth would think that he was not taking the war seriously.

And to add salt to the wound, he had suddenly burst into heartfelt song. His bass, off-key singing normally attracted looks of annoyance from his men, but did not do so today.

The clashing feelings of fear and the sense of duty brought on by the sentiment of "protecting the Princess (she had accompanied them to the battlefield)" had mentally affected even some of the former mercenaries.

And yet, as shaken as they were, a sprout of confidence telling them that they could definitely win the battle began to bud within them after watching their calm and composed commanding officer break

into song.

As long as the commanding officer remained composed until the very end, the soldiers fighting under him could have some peace of mind.

On the other hand, if the person in charge panicked into a feverish haste, his men would grow anxious as they tried to keep up with his orders.

In that sense, Rain's composure served to reassure his men.

"Oh..... Senoa, c'mere for a second."

After taking notice of one of the many sets of eyes on him, he beckoned his beautiful aide over.

Senoa, who was clad in simple leather armor instead of her favored silver armor because Rain had prevented her from wearing the latter to battle, drew her horse closer to his.

".....What is it, General?"

She lacked her usual energy for some reason.

Her smooth skin was pallid, and her blue, almond eyes were frantically jumping here and there. She was doing her best not to look at the large army in front of her.

Rain gently reached out and clasped Senoa on the shoulder.

"Ge, general....."

"Listen close, Senoa. You're my aide. That's why I have something to tell you."

"Of, of course....."

Senoa looked back at him with a meek look on her face, which was rare for her.

“The battle will start soon. Most of our men used to be mercenaries, so they’re used to battle, but there are a few who are fighting for the first time.”

Rain’s words were overflowing with kind consideration. He clapped his hand across his aide’s shoulder as he continued,

“If you see a soldier vomit from fear or something like that, I want you to pretend that you didn’t see it without reprimanding them. Even the greatest of heroes are terrified during their first fight. That’s normal, and it’s definitely not something to be ashamed of.It becomes easier to deal with the fear the more you experience it. Alright? Return to the rear guard if you understand. Being the Princess’ bodyguard is also an important role.”

“General.....”

Her eyes, which marked her as a noble, were moist.

She had fully understood who the kindness in his words were really directed at.

Her face crumpled and twisted, but Senoa was able to mold it into a full-blown smile.

“I have received and understood your orders.Incidentally, are you not afraid, General? Even when you face an army that large?”

Rain smiled, but it was a darker smile than what he usual wore.

“My ability to feel fear was burned away. I don’t feel anything. Though I know I probably should be afraid.”

Senoa wanted to ask for further details, but felt that it would be too rude to do so. Instead, she bowed deeply to him from her horse and said,

“I’ll be praying for your luck in battle, General.I plan on becoming strong enough to fight with you shoulder to shoulder one

day. So, please wait a little until that day comes.”

Then, Senoa turned her horse around and quietly galloped away.

~*~*~*~*~

Luminas knit his eyebrows together, creating deep trenches in his forehead, as he glared at the Sunkwoll army from the Zarmine army headquarters.

For some time now, he had been baited and lured all over the place by the distressing information that his scouts had brought back..... In other words, he had been baited by false information telling him that a large army was hiding here and there, or that Rain had gathered the entire Sunkwoll army and had circumvented the Zarmine army to ambush them from behind, and thus was not in a very cheerful mood.

Rain had likely planted reports of those false findings by having his mages or whatnot use the “Illusion Spell,” but Luminas couldn’t ignore the reports outright if he was to be cautious.

Besides, King Leygur had personally warned him to “be wary of Rain” repeatedly via Magic Vision more times than he had cared to count. He couldn’t help that caution bred more caution.

However, I can’t ignore that we had to slow down our advance as a result. Well, it’s not as if it will affect the results of the upcoming battle anyhow,

Or so Luminas had thought at the time, unaware that he would soon be forced to swallow both his words and his naïveté.

“Good grief..... I don’t like this at all.”

After hearing the idle complaint that Luminas had accidentally let slip, Garblake pulled up his horse and perceptively inquired,

“What grieves you, Luminas?”

“Well..... This Rain of ours isn’t the type of man who would throw himself into battle that he had no chance of winning. And yet, he is here before us..... I can’t help but think that he has some sort of plan up his sleeve. The problem is that I can’t even begin to guess what the nature of this plan is. Not to mention that none of the scouts that I sent in have returned.”

“It’s possible that he doesn’t have a plan at all. Besides, even if he did have a plan, all we have to do is press on without giving them a single step,”

Garblake replied with an answer that was truly befitting of his character while stroking his beard.

“Indeed. But that man is dangerous. In both his strength as an individual and his ability as a commander. I cannot help but be wary of him.”

“.....Luminas, are you hiding something from me? Both you and His Majesty are far too wary about him.”

Garblake gave his aide the side-eye for a lo~ng time.

Realizing that it would be difficult to hide it any further, Luminas opened his mouth and said in a heavy tone,

“That man might be a Dragon Slayer.”

“What?!”

Garblake abruptly turned to face his aide.

“I don’t know the details either, but.....”

Prefacing his speech with a dash of doubt, Luminas began to speak of the results of his investigations into Rain’s past.

“Rain appears to have left his hometown and begun his journey when he was fifteen. While his motives are yet unclear, he had a

habit of recklessly throwing himself into battle. If he caught wind of the existence of a base of a group of bandits, he would storm it alone with nothing but a single sword in hand.....is the general gist of his scope of activities at the time. That man seems to have wanted to grow stronger by any means necessary, so perhaps it was meant to be his way of training.

Then, right after he turned eighteen, he heard rumors about a mythical beast.....in other words, a dragon, rampaging around a land far away and unsurprisingly left for its nest to challenge it in battle.

Their fight lasted an entire day, and although he suffered a grievous wound in the process, Rain apparently managed to defeat the mythical beast. This is all just a rumor, of course.

But, as for whether it's true or not? I believe it is. In truth, he still looks like a youth despite being twenty-five. I believe that is because he stopped aging when he defeated the mythical beast at eighteen.

Those who defeat a dragon on their own will obtain their overwhelming power, in other words, their near-immortal lifespan and their powerful magic -it would appear that the legends were true.

It's just...you can't even call him human anymore. He has too much power for a mere human. I cannot fathom why he yearned for so much power, but he went too far. Of course, this is all based on the assumption that the rumors I uncovered are true."

Luminas pursed his lips together with a sour face.

This was how he truly felt. While he shared the sentiment of wanting to grow stronger, he had no intention of picking a fight with an all-powerful mythical beast. He felt that Rain's methods had been too extreme.

Garblake, on the other hand, had other thoughts and voiced his approval with a low growl.

"A Dragon Slayer, huh? To think that they really existed. As a

knight, I'd love to have a chance to fight him one-on-one. I'm itching to test out my skills against him."

Luminas almost blurted, "whoa there!" out loud.

What was he thinking? There was no way he could win. His opponent was a monster who had defeated the strongest of mythical beasts and inherited all of its power. No matter how strong he was, there was no way that Garblake, a mere human, could win.

Only a monster could take on a monster. Monsters like the daemons who fell long ago.....or like King Leygur.

But Luminas chose instead to reply, "victory will be ours even if you don't personally take to the field, General," as if nothing was wrong.

It was entirely possible that word of this had already reached their king, even if by accident. For better or worse, he was an exceedingly cautious man.

"In any event, we cannot move about so carelessly at the moment. At least not until we see through the extent of Rain's plans,"

Luminas said, as if he was talking to himself.

~*~*~*~*~

While Rain was singing without a care in the world as he glared at the large army in front of him, the cheers of the knights around him informed that Ralphus and the Princess had left the rear guard and was heading toward him. Ralphus was naturally equipped in full armor. The Princess was wearing a dress of simple tailoring. Behind them was Yuri, who wore fashionable blue leather armor with style.

Meanwhile, Gwen and Nigel were obediently awaiting orders back at the rear guard.

"Rain, the enemy isn't moving,"

Ralphus said right off the bat.

“Yeah. It’d be nice if they’d just charge at us all at once, with that Garblake guy at the point--but I guess it won’t be that easy. I guess I’ll just have to go over for a bit and invite them over.”

“But Rain!”

The Princess suddenly raised her voice.

She was taken aback as the others regarded her with surprise, and continued only after lowering both her eyes and her voice.

“.....Surely there’s no need for you to personally take lead, is there?”

Ralphus and Yuri stole a glance at the princess before staring deadpan at Rain.Yuri, in particular, stared at him with sharp eyes (or so he felt).

After clearing his throat on purpose, Rain answered,

“You know, Princess...”

He threw out his chest with exaggerated pride and gazed down at the large, black army before him. He continued,

“I won’t be done in by small fry like them. It’ll be fine as long as I don’t mess up my timing. Then, I just have to run. Besides, I used to be called “Rain the Gale Wind” as a kid. It won’t be a problem.”

Then, Ralphus interposed,

“Weren’t you called a “wonder child” when you were young? I thought that’s what you said before...”

“Shut it, you. I was also called Rain the Gale Wind! You’re a man, so stop being so nitpicky!”

“Ah, my bad. By the way, since I’m already here, should I fight in the frontlines too? I think I should be able to provide you with a bit of

cover.”

“No way. It’s my turn to fight. You and your aides guarding the Princess. That’s what we decided.”

This time, Yuri interjected and said,

“But Captian Leni is like that, so wouldn’t it be better if you take him up to his offer?”

At her words, everyone except for Rain turned to look to their left. Their expressions turned gloomy after seeing what she had meant.

Rain didn’t have to look to know. Leni was probably trembling so hard that it was visible to the eye. Though he was reasonably strong, Leni was a scaredy-cat. He generally acted like that when battle drew near.

“He’s always like that, so it’ll be okay. All things despite, he’ll still fight properly when push comes to shove.Though he’ll be a bit teary for it.”

“.....Isn’t that just an act of desperation?”

Yuri needlessly pressed on.

“Zip it! It’ll all good and fine as long as it works out in the end.”

Despite how hard he was trembling, Leni was still here and had not run away. While Rain thought that Leni’s presence was a testament to his courage in its own right, the others did not seem to share his views. They would not go as far as to call Leni a coward, but they probably still felt that he was unreliable.

A little while later--. The Princess, who had been looking at her feet as if she had been suffering in silence, looked up and gazed directly at Rain with a faint blush coloring her cheeks.

All of her fear and trembling had vanished, and there was a small

smile on her lips.

“I’ll say no more. I pray for your luck in battle, Rain. I’ll trust you and wait at the rear guard.....for your return. I do not intend of fleeing by myself. I’ll be waiting for you no matter what.”

She had most likely wanted to gent~ly add on, “*I entrust my life to you.*”

Rain nodded silently.

“Well, Ralphus, I’ll leave the Princess to you.”

“Understood. Do try not to die out there.”

“Course I won’t. I’m too awesome to be the type of guy who dies somewhere like this.”

Finally breaking out into broad smiles, Ralphus and the Princess turned their horses around and returned to the rear guard.

“.....And why are you still here?”

“What’s with the Princess’ attitude?”

Yuri, who had remained behind, asked sharply.

“Eh?”

“Geez! Don’t “eh?” me. Spit it out already!”

Yuri lost all traces of formality as soon as no one else could hear her. Rain, however, did not criticize her for it because he was in no position to do so. They were in the same boat.

“It’s no big deal..... Anyways, you should hurry back too. The battle’s about to start for real.”

“You saying that it’s no big deal proves that it actually is. Sheesh, you work fast.”

“You’re just imagining things.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll talk more about this later. But in all seriousness, will you really be okay cutting through their frontlines like that?”

“Pfft, your worries are wasted on me. I’m not exaggerating when I say I’m immortal, you know? Actually, you should be feeling sorry for the enemy instead.”

As usual, Rain brushed back his hair in a show of arrogance. He continued,

“Our future ruler is watching us today, so I better give it my best. Gotta stand out as much as I can in front of the person who pays my wages, so I’ll distinguish myself in battle and make myself look good! That’s the key to being successful in life”

“And then you’ll just laze around when said ruler’s not looking, right? I’m really starting to agree that my worries were wasted on you.”

Yuri looked exasperated as she continued,

“Well, I’m gonna head back too..... Work hard out there.”

“Yeah, you too. Don’t miss the timing on the signal. In a sense, you have the most important job today.”

“Got it! I make my livelihood too. I’ll make sure to complete my mission!”

She gave him a small wave with her hand in front of her body so that others couldn’t see and returned to the rear guard. There was no way that a girl as shrewd and cunning as Yuri would miss her timing.

After that, it’s all on me.

Rain smoothly unsheathed his magic sword. He held it horizontally in front of him.

“Obey my commands!”

Bzzzzzzzzzt!

The sword, swirling with a bluish-white aura, hummed louder and it began to grow longer. Soon, it was as long as a pike. The infamous sword that was known throughout the continent, for whatever reason, was able to grow to a certain extent if its wielder willed it.

Or, it could have been a type of fluid metal--though that didn't mean much to anyone other than Rain.

“I guess even this tiny, closed-off world is still filled with mysteries.”

Rain smiled and continued,

“Whatever..... Shall we begin? Hey, Leni!”

“Y, yes sir!”

Leni jerked and trembled some more a little way from Rain after being called.

“Let's go! Don't fall behind!”

Leni smiled weakly and bobbed his head up and down.

“I, I'm ready when, whenever you are.”

“Relax, you dolt. The worst thing that can happen is that you die. Don't worry about it so much.”

“But I don't wanna diee!”

Ignoring Leni, who had begun to lament miserably, Rain raised the Siren's Blade high up in the air.

“Frontlines, prepare for battle!”

Clatter clatter!

The metallic sounds of his men readying their weapons filled the air. Each and every soldier waited for Rain's next signal with baited breath.

Rain took a deep breath and brought down his magic sword, shouting,

“Frontlines, attack! To meeeeee!!”

“Wooooah!!”

With the cheers of Rain's men behind her, Kris spearheaded the charge with Rain on her back. The reddish-brown earth scattered around her like arrows, and the wind roared as it whipped around Rain's ears.

Kris had overtaken Rain's men in an instant. There was nothing strange about it. After all, no living thing across the entire land could possibly match Kris' speed. She crossed over the river in a blink of an eye.

Seeing Rain charge at them at full speed, the archer units deployed at either side of the Zarmine army began to shoot in a hurry.

However, they misjudged their distance and most of their arrows went flying off-mark because Kris was too fast for them. The few arrows that did fly true were easily swatted aside by Rain's extraordinarily keen kinetic vision and his magic sword.

Rain rushed straight into the enemy vanguard without slowing down and angrily shouted,

“Come at me if you wanna die!”

As he yelled, Rain swung his pike-sized magic sword to the side. After its vivid afterglow subsided, three enemy knights lay dead on the ground with matching wounds cutting evenly across their chests. Although they had been wearing armor, it had been as effective as paper before the Siren's Blade.

“Th, this guy! Stop messing ar-”

“Shut it! And move your hands before you move your mouth!”

“Gwaa!”

An enemy commander, who happened to be standing near Rain, was felled by the magic sword’s blade before he could finish his sentence.

Rain went on a rampage and swung his sword at random. The crowd of enemy knights around him were buried with one swing of his magic sword. He had created a mountain of victims in just a few dozen seconds.

“Hey, what’s wrong!? Give me everything you’ve got!”

“Wha, what a guy.....”

As the knights that composed the enemy vanguard broke out in cold sweat and began to retreat, overwhelmed, Leni charged in with his men in tow and a strange cry rising from his throat.

In an instant, the area was filled with the sound of multiple sets of horse hooves racing across the ground.

“U, uwawaaaaaan!”

Lance in hand, Leni fell in step with Rain while on the verge of tears--or rather, with a cry that sounded like half a sob.

“General, we’ll be together when we die!”

He shouted, as he lunged at the enemy soldiers that swarmed them. For all of his crying, he still managed to repel enemy lances and pierce the gaps in enemy armor with sharp finesse.

Despite his timid nature and dislike for battle, Leni’s talents and abilities as a knight were more than enough to be first-rate.

“That’s the spirit, Leni! It’s not scary anymore if you fight; not scary at all! So go all out! I’ll at least pick up your bones!”

After shouting out his exceedingly irresponsible words, Rain moved his magic sword so fast that it became a blur. In fact, the magic sword, which Rain was spinning around like a water wheel, moved so fast that its afterimages made it look like it had split into multiple copies. Rain was like a walking nightmare for the Zarmine knights.

Suddenly, a baby-faced knight jumped in front of Rain, trembling.

“I, I can fight too!”

“--Tch!”

While he was about to slice through the knight’s frail neck at lightning speed, Rain instantaneously drew back his magic sword and grabbed the knight by the waist instead.

“Wah, aaaah! Wha, what the hell are you doing?!”

“What am *I* doing?! It’s way too early for you to be on the battlefield. Come back once you’ve grown up a bit!”

After speaking, Rain threw the knight away with a single hand.

“Waaaaah!”

The knight, who should have weighed at least one hundred kilograms with his armor, drew a ridiculously large arc in the air as he flew away at an unbelievable speed.

“Weak; you’re all way too weak! You’re barely putting up a fight!”

All of Rain’s men cheered at his show of superhuman strength. Then, they charged at their enemies with increasing momentum.

On the other hand, the Zarmine army was startled by Rain’s power and started to be pushed back despite having the overwhelming advantage in numbers.

“Did you see that just now, Luminas?”

Garblake asked with a creaking voice at the Zarmine army headquarters.

The headquarters had been set up on top of a man-made hill of dirt that overlooked the battlefield, so they were able to see Rain’s fighting in minute detail. Garblake and Luminas were stupefied after witnessing Rain throw a knight equipped in heavy armor with one hand.

“.....It’s a good thing that we have the advantage in numbers. We would have no chance at winning otherwise,”

Luminas finally replied after quietly clearing his throat.

Rain was a man that he had never wanted to make an enemy out of, but was still just a single man when it came down to it. No matter how much military prowess Rain boasted, there was no way to overcome the fact that the Zarmine army had tens of thousands more soldiers to their advantage.

“Weak; you’re all way too weak! You’re barely putting up a fight!”

Yelled Rain in an inconveniently loud manner.

Garblakes cheeks twitched. As a commander who prided his prowess in the martial arts, he found it difficult to ignore that slight.

“General, you must not respond to his provocation. No matter what he babbles, our victory will remain unchanged.”

“You say that, Luminas. But you must also consider how it looks from our soldiers’ perspectives. What will I do if they start spreading rumors saying that all Garblake did was tremble in the safety of the headquarters?!”

“A commander’s duty is to preside over the battle. No one will criticize you for doing your job.”

“Ah, I suppose that must be how you think.”

Garblake looked at his aide with bloodlust in his eyes. Luminas reflexively looked away. The two of them had never gotten along very well to begin with. Luminas knew all too well that Garblake had never thought too kindly of him.

“I came here to fight. I can’t just stand here as that youngster makes light of me! There are limits to how much I can endure!”

“General! We must not act too reckless--”

As a flustered Luminas struggled to hold back his general, Rain’s loud jeering echoed around them at the worst timing possible.

“Where’s that spineless coward called Garblake?! Is he hiding in the back huddled up in feear?!”

“Da, damn youuuu!”

Garblakes eyes suddenly shot open wide.

He roared at his attendant to bring over his spear.

“General!”

“Shut up! I can’t just sit back and watch as he keeps making light of me! I climbed all the way up to my current position in life with just my sword and spear. I won’t turn away from my enemies now! You can stay here and count your soldiers or something!”

Burning red with rage, Garblake yelled at his men to follow him as he whipped his horse and galloped away.

“Ugh! Such foolishness!”

Luminas grinded his teeth, knowing that there was no way he could simply abandon Garblake here. The death of an army’s overall commander would lead to its downfall.

“All troops, advance! Follow the General! Don’t you dare let him die!”

Rain knew that the first step of his plan had gone well when he saw a cloud of dust arise from deep within enemy ranks.

As he had expected, the man called Garblake was someone who prided his military prowess and was thus susceptible to being lured over if properly provoked.

It would have been much easier if he could challenge Garblake to single combat, but, unfortunately, Garblake had dragged a bunch of “extras” along with him. Not to mention that Rain might not necessarily be his chosen opponent.

It would be difficult for an ordinary knight other than Rain to defeat Garblake.

Then, I’ll just go ahead and do as I planned--

Rain exchanged looks with Leni, who was fighting at his side, after determining his next objective on the spot.

Leni, who had been waiting for the enemy to make their move, understood the meaning behind their exchange and curtly nodded.

Then.

The flow of the battle changed little by little. Rain and the Sunkwoll army pulled back in a natural manner, just as they had planned to do in advance.

Their initial momentum had just been a fluke and they were now being pushed back the Zarmine army as their lines crumbled--that was what they wanted to trick their enemies into thinking. And they succeeded.

Watching the Sunkwoll army act out their retreat, the Zarmine army decided that it was a great chance to press a counterattack.

Ignoring the fact that he wasn't fatigued in the least--, Rain heaved his shoulders up and down as if he was at his limit and weakened his grip on his magic sword. He nonchalantly confirmed Garblake's position among the enemy reinforcements and waved his sword in the air.

"Tch! Fall back for now; retreat!"

The Sunkwoll army commenced their retreat as if they had been desperately awaiting his signal.

No matter how hard one looked, anyone would come to the conclusion that the Sunkwoll army had finally begun to be routed by their enemy.

"Uwaaaa, I'm gonna be kiiiilled!"

Leni's scream with theatrical flair..... Or, he could have actually meant it.

And then, the spies that Rain had planted among enemy ranks cheered--

"The enemy lines have crumbled! Attack now, and don't let their leader escape!"

The Zarmine knights, fully believing that they had reached the battle's final stages, let loose a war cry and moved to pursue their retreating enemies.

~~*~~*~~*~~

When Rain and his men had changed their tactics from a fierce assault to a sudden retreat, it truly looked as if they had become as helpless prey before Zarmine's large, black army.

--Or at least, that's what it had looked like to Senoa, who was stationed at the very back of the rear guard.

For a moment, she had truly thought that Rain had retreated because he could not fight any longer, despite knowing that it was all part of his plan.

Senoa could not stop herself from trembling as she watched the Zarmine army greedily engage in their pursuit from afar. She subconsciously gripped onto her thighs so hard that it hurt as she sat atop her horse.

Why was it that she hadn't been able to ask to fight by the General's side earlier?

Because he would definitely refuse? Indeed, he most likely would have. But, even if he hadn't refused, Senoa knew that she would not have been able to fight.

The reason was obvious--because she was afraid!

Senoa trembled slightly. What.....a pathetic sight she was!

She was always talking big, and she had continued to criticize him at every turn..... But to think that she would become so pathetic now that she was actually on the battlefield!

At this rate, how long, just how long, would it take until he approved of her?

Although she had never told anyone, Senoa had been taken to Rain as a warrior and had ran to his side because of it.

She admired his strength, his manliness.

.....That's what she had always thought and what she had always believed.

But her belief wavered whenever he granted her such kind words, like he had earlier.

Such words made her think that.....strength was not his only

charm.

The first time that she had laid her eyes upon him, the first words they had exchanged--in truth, she vividly remembered all of the times he had been so kind to her.

“Don’t stand at attention with such a stiff look on your face. You don’t have to push yourself that far, you know? You’re a beauty, so you should smile a bit more.”

Those were the gentle words he had told her the first time she had greeted him after taking up a new post at Cortecreas Castle.

After they had talked for a while, he had also said this:

“You want to hurry up and fight in order to get stronger? Don’t, we already have one too many idiots who did that and he’s standing right here in front of you.”

She still could not forget how his invincible smile had disappeared and was replaced by a terribly saddened expression as he had leaned against the window with his arms crossed.

She sighed every time she recalled it.

What had been the meaning behind that expression of his?

She thought that it was the same expression that he had worn when he had given her his warm words earlier.

But in all likeliness--*he probably won’t tell me the way I am now.....*

Senoa grinded her molars together.

I wasn’t able to become the kind of person that my father wanted me to be, but at the very least I want to be a knight that I can be proud of.

She wanted to become a warrior who could one day fight by his

side.

So please.....please wait for me just a little longer.

Please don't go ahead and leave me behind--

".....General Rain."

Someone gently touched Senoa's arm, as if they had been drawn to her quiet voice.

When she had jerked up her shoulders and turned around, Senoa found that Princess Shelfa had come close to her side without her noticing.

Leaving her hand on Senoa's arm, Shelfa stared deeply into Senoa's eyes.

It was as if she was trying to share her personal determination with that beautifully clear expression of hers.

"It'll surely be alright. There's no way that Rain will die at a place like this while fighting people like that.Let's have faith and wait for him to return."

Her infinite trust in Rain--and her sympathy for Senoa, shone through her whispered words.

Shelfa was the only person present who was wearing normal clothes instead of battle gear, yet she looked more at ease than anyone else.

Up until now, Senoa had secretly harbored ill feelings against the princess, but those feelings vanished as she looked into the princess' eyes.

She automatically reached out and took the princess' hand.

And she gently nodded many, many times.

“You’re right..... He’s bound to make it.”

They looked at each other and gently smiled.

~*~*~*~*~*

Naturally, Ganoa, who had betrayed the Sunkwoll army and had murdered King Douglass, was also present for the battle. However, instead of being posted in the frontlines, where it was easy to distinguish oneself in battle, he was posted much further behind the main army..... To put it frankly, he was assigned to the supply unit.

To manage and protect the Zarmine army’s provisions. That was the position that he had been given. Because of that, his comparatively slower unit had been left stranded when the main army had moved to pursue the retreating Sunkwoll army.

I used to be a proud noble of Sunkwoll, damn it! Damn you, Garblake, for making light of me!

Ganoa glanced over his unit, which was mostly comprised of wagons, with a fed-up expression as he toyed with his curly blond hair.

He would not be able to distinguish himself in battle at this rate.

The men who had accompanied him were also moping about. Many of them were also nobles, albeit of different ranks, and were complaining incessantly.

Ganoa felt that some of the gazes that his men directed at him had turned somewhat cold.

I was planning to ask to have Princess Shelfa as my reward, but at this rate--

While he was worrying endlessly about his lewd ambitions, he saw a smoke signal suddenly rise up far ahead of him from where the Sunkwoll army was.

“What? What kind of signal comes this late into a battle? Though it’d be hilarious if it was the signal for Rain’s death.”

The whisper that escaped him had been his wishful thinking, rather than an actual conjecture.

All joking aside, from Ganoa’s perspective, the outcome of the war was already decided even if it wasn’t the signal for Rain’s death.

The unit directly under Garblake’s control had already cross the Jigrem River and was closing in on the Sunkwoll army. Even Rain’s devilish fortune must have dried up by now.

Being able to see Rain’s decapitated head would be his sole consolation from these dissatisfactory circumstances.

If it was possible, he wanted to hang up Rain’s head in his personal chambers. Ganoa simply hated the man that much.

“Could I really ask for.....hmm?

Ganoa knit his eyebrows together.

He could hear a strange, faint sound coming from somewhere.

When he listened closer, he realized that the sound was steadily growing louder.

Is this.....the sound of running.....water?

“General Ganoa!”

“Hmm, what is it?”

Ganoa’s aide cried out to him as he continued to strain his ears,

“P, please look upstream!”

“Upstream? What happened upstre--what?!”

.....Ganoa saw an enormous torrent of water rushing downstream.

A violent stream of water flooded the Zarmine army, which had been crossing the river. Unable to flee, the heavily equipped Zarmine knights were swept up in the rushing waters. They had no choice but to drown because they were wearing armor.

“Wh, wha.....!”

As Ganoa looked on in blank shock, he saw that the unit that had already crossed the river had been forcefully cut off from the rest of the army.

Then, the unfortunate knights on the other side of the river were suddenly assaulted by the Sunkwool army.

“This is.....ugh, it’s Rain! How dare he play such petty tricks!”

Ganoa, who had recovered surprisingly fast from his state of shock, immediately understood. This was undoubtedly Rain’s plan.

To spell it out, Rain had dammed up the river, lured Garblake across it, and had released the dam when the signal had risen.

As a result, he would be able to take down Garblake (and possibly Luminas too, if he was lucky) once he was cut off from his allies.

“Damn you, damn you!”

Blinded by rage, Ganoa cursed Rain over and over.

However, he soon realized that he was in no place to do so.

Or rather, he had been made to realize. --That Rain’s plan had a second objective.

“General!”

“Shit, what is it this time?!”

Ganoa had been on the cusp of yelling at his aide, but stopped short after being horrified by what his aide was pointing at.

A small unit was drawing closer to them at the speed of a gale wind.

It was Gunther's unit, who had deployed before Rain's and had concealed themselves in order to target their enemy's provisions, but, naturally, Ganoa had known nothing of this. He could, however, imagine why they were here whether he wanted to or not.

Ganoa looked toward his allies in a panic.

Unfortunately, all of the other troops were far ahead of him because they had launched an all-out attack. Ganoa trembled once he grasped the situation that he was in. His allies were too far away to respond to his crisis, and neither did they have the leisure to do so even if they wanted to.

Besides, Ganoa was an outsider to the Zarmine army. He was not a comrade that they would care to save.

To add to his misfortunes, he would not be able to flee with a unit consisting of wagons..... A cold sweat crawled up Ganoa's spine.

He saw that the enemy unit was carrying multiple flame torches.

Rain smiled in satisfaction when he saw smoke rising from the rear of the Zarmine army.

Gunther had done it as planned. That smoke was proof that the enemy's provisions were burning up. With this, the battle drew closer to an end.

"Hey, you lot! All of your food just turned to ashes without leaving a single crumb behind! So stop your futile resistance!"

He declared to the Dark knights who were still fighting.

The results were remarkable.

The knights, who had been using the last reserves of their strength to keep fighting, dropped their weapons one after another. They could not fight if they did not have supplies (food). They knew this all too well.

As expected of the Zarmine army, there were none who believed that they could keep fighting on spirit alone.

But there were always exceptions to the rules, though not always in a bad way--

A lone, well-built knight calmly walked towards Rain from the sea of unarmed knights who were kneeling in defeat.

He held a blood-soaked sword in hand and his feet were steady. Unlike the others, gold embellishments decorated his pauldrons.

--Hmmm?"

Recognizing who the man was in an instant, Rain unmounted Kris. After returning his magic sword to its original longsword size, he awaited the man.....no, he awaited the overall commander of the entire Zarmine expeditionary force.

"You're Rain?"

His black armor was dented here and there and was painted with crimson blood, though it did not appear to be his. The man in question was hale and hearty despite his age. He was a warrior that none could look down upon-as expected of a general of Zarmine, which had once been a complete meritocracy.

"Yeah. And you're General Garblake.....was it?"

"Exactly. I'm here to give my final greetings."

Despite the content of his sparse words, Garblake looked refreshed

as he took up his sword.

Leni and the rest of Rain's men, who had gathered around in exuberance, stopped in their tracks. No one dared to say a word.

"Can I ask you just one question?"

Garblake curtly asked Rain, who had also readied his magic sword.

"What is it?"

"Is it true that you're a Dragon Slayer?"

".....Yeah, it's true,"

Answered Rain, causing Leni, Senoa, and Yuri to lean back in surprise, Ralphus and Gwen to shake their heads in disbelief, and Nigel to look up with a glint in his eyes.

The least shocked of all was Princess Shelfa, who simply gazed at Rain in admiration. She did not seem surprised at all.

"I see, you're someone who has slain a mythical beast. Hahaha. It seems that I'll be able to cross blades with the strongest at the end of my life. In that aspect, it's not a bad way to go."

A broad smile broke across Garblake's face.

"Don't you have the option of surrendering for now and coming back to fight us again?"

"No, I don't. His Majesty is not so forgiving. Even if I were to return to my country, I would be killed without a doubt."

"Then don't go back and just stay here. You can join us."

"You say such odd things..... I did hear that you were strange, and it seems the rumors were true."

Garblake tilted his head, mystified. He continued,

“But allow me to offer my thanks. Thank you, but I have to intention of accepting you offer. Now let us end our little talk. You’re willing to be my opponent, I presume?”

“Guess it can’t be helped.....”

Rain was not compelled to encourage Garblake to surrender. It was because he felt that Garblake had been cut from the same cloth as Ralpus.

There was nothing more he could say to a man whose honor did not allow him to surrender to an enemy.

Rain faced his opponent while holding his sword in a what looked like an easy-going manner.

Garblake, on the other hand, held his sword straight upright before him as he stood at full attention. It was the stance and decorum of a knight about to challenge an opponent to single combat.

Rain couldn’t have cared less about decorum. He simply observed his opponent in silence.

With quick steps, Garblake slid his feet across the earth and closed the distance between them. Then, he slowly brought his sword to his side. The wind blew a cloud of dust between the two warriors.

Garblake took the initiative.

He dashed forward and closed what little distance remained between them. Chunks of dirt were kicked into the air as he unleashed an attack with his full weight behind it. His sword transformed into a flash of silver light that drew into Rain’s vitals.

Swoosh!

His nimble attack, which made his audience involuntarily hold their breaths, was truly befitting of the skilled knight that he was. His longsword looked like it had mercilessly burrowed into Rain’s

abdomen. However, what the sword had actually cut had been nothing more than a shadow of Rain, which simmered away like a heat haze.

The wind blew again. However, this wind had been churned up by Rain.

Rain's afterimage passed through Garblake's side as if it was chasing after its original and settled behind him in one smooth flow.

The wind died down, and the two warriors stood still--meanwhile, Rain's multiple afterimages converged into his upright figure.

Rain, who had been holding his magic sword in front of him, quietly relaxed his stance. And then--

“--! Gah!”

A crimson line split Garblake's body open and guzzled with blood. Coughing violently, he staggered a few steps forward. Just like that, he fell forward with a heavy thud.

“As I'd thought.....you are truly, s, strong”

Garblake said with his face half buried in the sandy soil.

Rain bowed to him in silence.

“You were strong too. As expected of someone who was tasked to command the entire Zarmine expedition army. And I'm not saying this just to be nice.”

Garblake seemed to let out a short laugh.

He opened his bloody lips and whispered something one last time. Rain thought that he had whispered a woman's name, but Garblake had already passed by the time he had knelt down to listen.

Rain closed Garblake's empty, open eyes with a sigh.

Good grief.....this doesn't feel good at all. Though I know there was no other way.

Rain flung off the blood from his magic sword with a single sweep and returned it to its sheath with a click.

“We won..... We were victorious,”

Said Senoa, still in a daze.

“Ye, yeah! We won against Zarmine!”

A knight, who was standing stock still near Senoa, cried out as the realization hit him. His voice spread like wildfire and grew into a cheer that shook the earth.

“We won! We really won! We defeated Zarmineeee!”

The cheering spread like a tidal wave. The Sunkwoll knights grabbed each other by the hands and stomped their feet.

On the other hand, the knights of Zarmine, who had become prisoners of war, hung their heads low in dejection. The main Zarmine army began to retreat from the other side of the river. There was nothing else they could do, as their provisions had been stolen and their overall commander had been defeated.

“You did it, Rain.”

Ralphus had saddled his horse at some point and was looking down at Rain from it, as did his two aides.

“What’s up? Isn’t the fight over?”

“It is. But we failed to take down Luminas. So I’m going to try and catch up to him, and I’ll make sure the Zarmine army is withdrawing while I’m at it.”

“You’re gonna try to catch up to him.....the waters are still pretty high, you know?”

“There’s a small bridge about five kilometers downstream.”

“.....I’m not gonna stop you, but.....you’re pretty diligent, aren’t you?”

“It’s in my nature. And more importantly, Rain...”

Ralphus leaned forward on his horse before continuing,

“You’ll have a round with me when I get back, yes?”

“A round? Of a game or something?”

“Don’t play dumb. There’s a Dragon Slayer nearby, so as a knight I simply must ask him for a match.”

“I straight up refuse.” [an immediate reply]

Rain disliked annoying things.

“Aw, c’mon Boss Rain! We’ve already decided that I’m goin’ to be next after our Boss here, ya know?”

Said Gwen in an extremely matter-of-fact manner.

“Hey! Quit deciding things without even consulting the actual person in question! I don’t like doing things that’ll make me sweat, you hear?! And besides--you know what, I’m feeling a little under the weather right now.”

“I’ll have you practice with me to my heart’s content once we get back to my castle.”

“No, I’m really not feeling too great right now. How should I put it, my body’s been feeling pretty heavy lately and I’m starting to feel sick, and I think I should take a day off and visit a healer--”

“Hahaha! I’m itchin’ to test out my skills.”

“And plus, my liver’s been acting up all of a sudden.”

“I’ll get going now; and it’s a promise.”

Ralphus pulled on the reins and turned his horse around. He completely ignored Rain, who had pressed his hand against his abdomen to add credit to his story.

Then, even Nigel, who had been silent until now, absent-mindedly added,

“I would also like to have a match with you, Lord Rain.”

“.....You guys need to learn to listen when someone tells you something.”

“Oh, and Rain?”

Ralphus looked back before he left and smiled.

“What?”

“You’re pressing down on your stomach, not your liver.”

“Shut it! And don’t come back!”

Ralphus laughed loudly, amused, and promptly left with his men in tow.

“Tch! As if I’d do any sword training with any of them. I’m definitely gonna run away.”

“General~”

Now that Ralphus and the others had left, Leni and the rest of Rain’s men stepped closer.

“What now? Do you have something to say too?”

“I do! Why did you keep quiet about being a Dragon Slayer until now?”

“Because I’m a modest person, all things despite. I can’t just go around bragging about something like that.”

Leni was rendered speechless, as if someone had blurted out something indecent, at Rain’s curt reply. Then, Rain continued,

“.....What’s with that face? Besides, haven’t you seen me use magic without an incantation before? Most people would’ve noticed that.”

“My body wouldn’t be able to keep up if I let myself get surprised at every single thing you do, General.”

“Don’t be stupid. You were just being careless.”

As he dealt with Leni, Rain saw that Senoa and Yuri were standing stock still with blank looks on their faces. It looked like their spirits had left them. The rest of his men were also generally in the same boat and had blank amazement etched onto their faces.

He hadn’t wanted to tell anyone because he knew that they would react this way.

“.....Rain.”

But there was one person whose attitude had not changed. Princess Shelfa wrapped both of her hands around Rain’s and smiled with glistening eyes. Leni, who was standing beside her, was surprised.

He would have to warn her not to do things like that so readily in the future.

“Well done, Rain.Um,”

“Yes?”

“Th, there was something that I wanted to tell you.....no, something that I must tell you no matter what now that the battle is over.”

The princess began to fidget for some reason.

She stole numerous glances at Leni and the rest of Rain's men as if something about them had bothered her.

She's not the type of person to ask for money (obviously). Then, does she want to discuss something with me in secret? thought Rain.

"Is there something you wish to discuss with me?"

".....It's something similar to that, but not quite."

I have no idea what she wants.

She'll probably speak more freely when we're alone. After all, this Little one (though she's grown fairly tall, so she's not all that little anymore) hasn't really opened up to anyone besides me.

"Alright, Princess. I'll listen to what you have to say once we make our triumphant return to Galfort Castle.

"Yes!"

The princess nodded repeatedly in relief.

After flashing a secret wink and a quick smile at the princess, Rain signaled to his men to prepare to leave.

But then.

A sudden chill shivered down Rain's back.

Pressure.

Rain broke out into a cold sweat in a blink of an eye. Somewhere nearby--there was a person emitting waves of overwhelming power, like the water pressure caused by a great cataract.

Furthermore, these waves of power, this "Ki," was unmistakably different from what he had felt from Princess Shelfa.

It was different in that it was not simply a wave of pure power, but

also carried the bone-chilling feeling of bloodlust within it.

Rain surveyed his surroundings, searching for the source of this enormous power.

--Found you.

A man wearing a black cloak and a black outfit of first-class tailoring, who seemed to fill up the entirety of Rain's vision, calmly came walking through Rain's scattered men.

He had silver hair, which was characteristic of the people of Zarmine, but no one asked him for his identity.

It was a slightly strange scene because he carried himself in such an imposing manner. With his gaze fixed at Rain from underneath his long bangs, he continued to walk as if he was simply taking a stroll in his own garden.

"Rain....."

The princess had noticed the man's presence before Rain's men had. Feeling something ominous in the air, she clung onto Rain's arm and held her breath.

"--Princess, please fall back a bit."

"Rain..... When I look at that person, I--"

"I know,"

Rain interrupted before she could finish. He added,

"And he's probably an enemy."

"What are you talking about?"

Senoa asked in an irritated voice.

Rain silently pointed at the mysterious man.

Then, Yuri stiffened up and cried out,

“Ki, King Leygur!”

“Wh, whaaat?! Are you sure?”

“It’s the enemy king!”

Startled by Yuri’s remark, Rain’s men finally noticed the suspicious man and began to panic.

Flustered, Leni and Senoa attempted to draw their blades.

“Everyone stop! You guys are no match for him. This guy’s scarily strong.”

“Got it! I’ll leave him to you, General,”

Said Leni as he promptly re-sheathed his sword.

Normally, Rain would have kicked him into next week for that reply, but today it was the correct response.

“Now, you should fall back too, Princess. Please watch from Leni’s side.”

“.....Please be careful Rain.”

She understood that she would only get in his way. Thus, the Princess obediently fell back to Leni’s side.

“Don’t even think about drawing your blades, guys! This guy came here to talk with me..... Isn’t that right?”

Rain directed his last question to the man who had purposefully stopped with a little distance between them..... King Leygur.

“Indeed. I am only interested in you..... Though I must say, I’m surprisingly well-known.”

The corners of Leygur's mouth lifted a little as he gazed in Yuri's direction. She hid behind Leni with a shriek. There was no reason for her to panic so much, as there was no way that a king would recognize each and every one of his spies by face.

Leygur, who had frigidly glanced over all of Rain's men, looked a puzzled once he saw the Princess. It was as if he had witnessed something baffling.

"To think that the other person who emitted such pressure other than Rain was this girl..... How odd."

After thinking on it for a short while, he turned his head and returned his gaze to Rain.

"No matter. I had not expected Garblake to be defeated so quickly, but you are my objective for today."

"I'm your objective, huh. You don't know what it means to have the tables turned on you, do you? I don't know how you got here, but it's pretty convenient for me that you did."

"I have a special skill that allows me to teleport anywhere that I've already been to at least once before. Surely it's nothing to be surprised about."

Of course that's something to be surprised about, you fucking bastard, thought Rain.

I've never even heard about a spell that convenient, as far as I'm concerned. And Rain was well-informed about almost every type of magic there was, too.

"Incidentally, putting my army's defeat here today aside, there is something I want to confirm,"

Leygur said in an indifferent tone, paying no heed to Rain's misgivings. Clearly, he did not care about Zarmine's defeat at all.

Then, Leygur quickly stretched out his hand in an unconcerned manner.

“Come, magic light!”

Without any incantation, a large explosion of light instantly burst from his palm and rushed directly toward Rain. The burst of light, which was bright enough to disorient onlookers, crashed into Rain before he could dodge.

“General!”

“Rain!”

Leni and the Princess’ cries of alarm overlapped with each other.

However, Leygur’s enormous magical energy had lost its momentum after being intercepted by something and was extinguished without a trace.

For a brief moment, something that looked like a transparent shield had materialized and glowed a myriad of colors after intercepting the attack, before vanishing as suddenly as it had appeared.

It was as if the shield had absorbed the magical energy that Leygur had released. In fact, Rain was still standing around as if nothing had happened even after the light had disappeared.

“Hmm. Was that the anti-magic field that only dragons are said to possess?”

Leygur put down his hand; however, he didn’t seem displeased at all, rather, the corners of his lips were curving into a smile. He continued,

“As you are able to use an ability that only the strongest mythical beasts are said to possess, it would seem that you are, in fact, a Dragon Slayer.”

“Hmph. If you get it, then I suggest that you stop wasting your energy.”

Rain flashed a grin and showed off his pearly white teeth, which he had been complimented on so many times that it had started to become vexing. He continued,

“Don’t underestimate me-I’ve inherited the power of a mythical beast. Half-assed magical attacks won’t work on me! Anything that doesn’t work on a mythical beast will also have no effect on me, you see!”

Leygur narrowed his eyes in apparent satisfaction without even bothering to reply. Rain glared daggers at him and continued,

“At any rate, you’ve sent assassins at me, suffered me a surprise attack, and now you’re starting to get on my nerves. You’ve got a lot of nerve picking a fight with me, dammit!”

Multiple beads of light instantly formed in the sky above Rain. The radiant orange mass of magic flickered as it grew larger and each bead began a crazed dance in the air.

“Be gone!”

Every ball of light rushed toward Leygur, leaving trails of light in their wake the moment that Rain pointed a finger at Leygur.

--A direct hit.

Leygur was enveloped by countless bursts of light that blossomed like a giant flower of magic.

The giant storm of magical hellfire enveloped his body and exhausted all of its energy to burn him to ashes. No normal human should have been able to withstand it.

“Alright! That’s the General for you!”

Leni pumped a fist into the air.

“No.....Not yet.”

“What’re you talking about? There’s no way that--”

Leni’s eyes opened wide in shock before he could finish saying, “he’s still alive after taking that to the face.” Even after the light faded away, Leygur was still standing around without a hair out of place.

“Hahaha.....ahahahahaha!!”

Leygur suddenly broke out into laughter. He laughed as if he could no longer contain the joy welling up in his heart.

“This absolute power! What a surprise. To think that a mere human could obtain it!”

“Are you part of some freakish cult or something?”

Rain spat out with displeasure. He continued,

“I don’t get you. You don’t look like Dragon Slayer or anything, but you can use magic without incantations.”

“An accurate observation. You and I are very alike, in a sense. We have far surpassed the humans living on this continent.”

“What’re you talking about? I’m human too.”

“Just listen. I’ve had my eyes on you for a while now. Ever since I heard that you abandoned the incompetent King Douglass, I thought that maybe you would be able to understand me.”

“.....What are you trying to say?”

“You’re unexpectedly slow on the uptake.”

Keeping his cool, Leygur continued,

“I want you to become mine. Considering how strong you are, I would welcome you to be as one of my own arms. You have that right.”

“And here I was wondering what you were gonna say.....”

Rain studied Leygur in exasperation. However, Leygur’s handsome face was the very picture of sincerity, so he must have been serious.

“It’s not that preposterous of a proposal, now is it? You’ve already turned your back on the late king. What’s so strange about you switching sides now? Someday.....I will conquer the entire continent. I will reward you handsomely when that time comes, but I’ll give you what was once Lunan for now. And soon enough, I’ll also give you all of Sunkwoll.”

“Hmm.....well that’s quite generous of you.....”

Rain crossed his arms with a tinge of surprise. Had anyone else ever evaluated him so highly before? No, they had not!

Numerous boos flew at him as he immersed himself in his thoughts.

“Wh, why do you look like you’re considering this seriously?!! You’re awful!”

“It’s exactly as Sir Leni says. It’s outrageous that you’d suck up to the enemy king!”

Rain’s two aides yelped in tandem. In the heat of the moment, Yuri also shouted, “you dumbass!!”

“I was just a little touched, alright?! --And Yuri, I’ll pay you back for that later!”

Rain looked to the princess on a whim after responding to his men without a moment’s delay.

.....Her clear, unclouded eyes looked back at him brimming with

her wholehearted trust.

Looks like her trust in me is the real deal. In that case, I'll bet everything on her, too!

Rain gave the princess a quick wave (he ignored the others because they pissed him off) and turned back to Leygur.

“Sorry, but I can’t. If I go with you, I’ll have to abandon the people who I can’t bring myself to abandon. So, I think it’s about time that you prepared yourself.”

Leygur’s face abruptly turned blank at Rain’s declaration. A cold, cold light dwelled in his black eyes.

“.....I don’t understand. Why do you care so much for this pile of trash? Is it because, in the end, you’re also a fool tied down by emotion?”

Leygur narrowed his cold eyes and continued,

“Come to think of it, you’re always clad entirely in black. Surely, it’s not because you’re grieving for someone, is it? I’ve heard that such pointless traditions exist out in the borderlands.”

Rain clenched his molars together. From the corner of his eyes he saw the princess raise her head in surprise.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. But I really don’t think I like you too much. I guess we have no choice but to fight.And you know what?”

Rain continued with pride,

“I’d take over the world myself rather than pick up after your leftovers!”

“.....It appears that I’ll have to teach you a thing or two about arrogance. I’ll curb your confidence as well.”

“Well, my limitless arrogance and my unbeatable invincibility are my forte, you see.”

Rain drew his magic sword with his characteristically bold smile on his face. The blade emitted a light that was more glaringly beautiful than usual, as if it had sensed its owner's strong will to fight.

In turn, Leygur threw off his cloak and drew his own sword.

Its blade swelled with an aura as crimson as blood. Leygur's sword was evidently also a magical one.

“This sword is named Justice,”

Leygur said quietly as an inconspicuous smile crept at the edge of his lips. He continued,

“Isn't it hilarious? There is no such thing as justice in this world, where strength means everything.”

“Hmmm.....I'll have to agree with you there.”

“And yet you still point your blade at me?Very well. I will teach you the fate of a fool who has overestimated his own abilities.”

Rain readied his magic sword with a loose grip and declared with a war cry,

“For the past ten years since I left my hometown--I've defeated everyone who I've faced with a sword in hand!”

With Rain's declaration, the two stopped talking--

And the final battle began.

Rain and Leygur stepped slowly in semi-circles. They were steadily attempting to circle around the other.

Not a single cough could be heard, despite their large audience. The only sound that permeated the area was the sound of two magic

sword's auras and the sound of the river's waters.

Crunch

The sound of Leygur crushing a rock under his foot reverberated in the air.

Then, at the same time--

Rain kicked off the earth and pressed forward while swinging up his sword with amazing speed. In less than a blink, he had reduced the distance between him and Leygur from several meters to zero and moved to attack.

Rain had rushed at Leygur like a gust of wind, but Leygur had still maintained eye contact with him all the way.

And at that moment, Leygur had laughed.

“Ugh!”

The slash that Rain had aimed at his opponent's upper body was easily blocked by the crimson magic sword.

Crackle crackle crackle

The two magic swords clashed and the magic imbued within each of them repulsed against the other with a terrible force. Sparks flew as the swords crackled against each other.

“You have great reflexes.”

Rain remained silent as he moved back and flicked his wrist.

The blue magic sword's light changed directions as if it were alive and attacked Leygur yet again.

But this, too, was easily blocked. Leygur had easily brushed aside the attacks that Rain had made with his herculean strength not only once, but twice.

Still, Rain continued to attack.

He locked swords with Leygur and pushed him aside, aiming to swipe across his side once he staggered.

But, the tip of his sword met only with his opponent's shadow.

Leygur had jumped into the skies just before Rain's attack had connected, leaving afterimages behind in his wake, and gently returned to the ground after a backflip. He moved so lightly that it was difficult to believe.

Rain rushed against Leygur again the moment the latter had landed and barraged him with a storm of sword strokes.

Leygur blocked and parried each strike.

It was one thing for Rain, who was a Dragon Slayer--

But the black-clad king, whose slender frame did not appear to carry much physical strength, was able to respond to Rain's fast and powerful attacks with room to spare.

Ten times, twenty times..... Blue and crimson mixed as the two magic swords clashed, their aura's fiercely repulsing the other each time, as Rain and Leygur continued their violent dance. Rain, who had been able to finish his battles in mere moments for the past few years, was now fighting for his life.

Little by little, a single question took over Rain's mind.

He's not even a Dragon Slayer, so how is he just as, no, more powerful than me?

"Thinking about something else in the middle of a fight?"

An ominous voice whispered.

By the time Rain had returned to his senses, Leygur had already moved into Rain's blind spot.

From the corner of his eye, Rain saw a leg approach him so fast that it was nothing more than a blur.

The leg bent like a whip and kicked him directly in the side. He had not had a chance to dodge it.

--Guh!"

Rain immediately jumped to the other side to lessen the force of the strike.

Even still, his body wracked with intense pain as the kick connected with unbelievable force. Rain was sent flying for at least five meters before he slammed into the ground.

And even then, he was forced to roll several times over because the force of the kick had yet to dissipate.

If he had taken the brunt of that force directly, his bones could have been pulverized and his insides could have ruptured instantly.

Rain broke out in a sudden rush of cold sweat, but he did not have the leeway to care.

"Rain!"

"Oh no, no way--Ge, general!"

The voices most likely belonged to the princess and Leni. Rain could not afford to look away, but he heard their voices tremble. With either shock.....or concern.

He tried to spring back up to his feet, but Rain unexpectedly found himself staggering instead.

Tch! That.....hit home, huh?

"That's pathetic, Rain."

Leygur had not closed in on him, for whatever reason. With his

magic sword in hand, Leygur stared at Rain with his black, abyss-like eyes.

“--! This match isn’t over yet! Are you trying to take it easy, you bastard?!”

“This match was over the very moment it began. No matter how strong you are, you’re still just a human in the end. A tiny little human living in this closed-off, confined world. Know that this is the very reason you have lost.”

Rain opened his eyes wide in surprise for a moment and roared,

“The hell are you trying to explain all of a sudden?! Or what, are you saying that you aren’t human?!”

Rain raised his head and glared as he shouted.

With his fighting spirit burning in his heart, he charged forward.

However--His speed, while still faster than that of an ordinary person’s, had decreased from before.

He brought up his sword from where it had been dragging along the ground to an upwards diagonal cut.

Leygur dodged it by taking a half step backwards, and Rain, who had missed his strike, closed the distance between them.

Leygur deftly twisted his wrist and leisurely evaded the magic sword that danced diagonally toward his shoulder.

The Unknown Genius Swordsman-- He left behind Rain, who was once known by that moniker, completely in the dust.

And with a voice that blended in with the blades of wind that violently scythed across the empty skies, Leygur said,

“You should already understand. You are no match for me. Become my subordinate. If you do, I’ll forget about how insolent

you've been until now. --Hmph!"

Giiin--crackle crackle crackle

Leygur solidly caught the multiple attacks that were aimed at his eyes.

He stared at Rain from the other side of the blade emitting a crimson aura.

"You sure like to talk a lot in the middle of a fight!"

Rain was able to put just enough strength into the sword arm to push Leygur back. However, unlike before, Leygur kept his footing and did not move an inch, as if he had planted roots into the ground. As irritating as it was, Rain saw that Leygur had not even broken into a sweat. All despite the fact that Rain, who boasted more physical strength than even Gwen, had pushed him back.

".....There are limits to my patience, Rain. I advise you to give up already."

"And become your subordinate?"

Rain.....Caught a fleeting glance at the princess who fervently looked upon him as earnestly as if she was in prayer and, in a voice that only Leygur could hear, enunciated word for word,

"As she is right now, that child needs me. Depending on how you look at it, it's entirely possible that I need her too. But, you know what, neither of us need *you* at all!"

Rain quickly lowered his body. In the brief opening that was created when Leygur stumbled forward, Rain kicked Leygur's legs out from under him.

"--! Tch!"

Leygur purposefully jumped to the side, jumped off the ground with

one hand, and skillfully made his landing.

--Or at least, he tried to.

Aiming for the very moment that his opponent landed, Rain rushed in as if he was being drawn into something.

If the monster in front of him was ever to break his posture, even just a little, it had to be now.

Rain brought up his magic sword from the ground and drew an arc in Leygur's direction.

The sword hummed and left behind a bluish-white strike in its wake.

Leygur's expression broke for the first time. He tried to evade by bending back his body, but was still left with a shallow gash around his shoulder. A spurt of fresh blood gushed from the wound.

"You're mine!"



Rain brandished his sword in pursuit of his opponent, who still managed to jump aside with his unstable stance.

And he struck down with his fastest blow yet, leaving a spectacular after-image in his sword's wake.

But--Leygur had corrected his stance in a blink of an eye.

“That was insufficient, Rain.”

Swoosh!

Even Leni and the others felt the wind that his sword had stirred up.

Leygur had thrown up his crimson blade and had perfectly parried Rain's magic sword, causing even Rain to stagger.

Without a moment's delay, Justice altered its course and gouged horizontally into Rain's defenseless torso. It was Rain's turn to spout a fountain of fresh blood.

“Nooooooooo!!”

Rain heard the princess scream as if she had taken the blow herself.

Rain's side was dyed red as he rolled away from Leygur across the earth multiple times, spraying out blood all the way. He tried to get up immediately afterwards.....but he couldn't. He dropped back down to his knees.

“Shit!”

His eyes fell back to the princess as he struggled to force his body upright. Shelfa was trying to rush over to him, and was only being held back by an equally flustered Leni.

Somehow, he managed to stand up after witnessing that sight.

“General!”

Senoa, and the rest of Rain's men, began to run over to assist him. However, they stopped in their tracks as if they had met with an invisible wall halfway through. It was likely Leygur's doing.

".....It is certainly commendable that you were able to wound me. How about it, Rain? Won't you change your mind? If you don't, you will die here,"

Leygur said as he calmly walked closer.

--I have to get stronger,"

Rain whispered after wetting his dry lips and shaking his head clear. He continued,

".....Stronger than anyone else..... Stronger than anything else in this world..... That's my only wish."

"What? Have you lost your mind from fear?"

Leygur knit his brows in doubt.

Rain simply flashed him a grin.

"Unfortunately, there's nothing in this world that scares me. Now.....let's finish this."

"So you were nothing more than a mere fool. What can you possibly finish when you're about to die from blood loss? If you want to die so badly, then so be it."

Leygur leapt in front of Rain's eyes the moment he finished his chilling declaration. The wind whistled as his silver hair fluttered behind him.

A crimson blow approached Rain's throat as the wind howled.

But then, time appeared to have stopped for an instant.

The two opponents froze perfectly in place--

“.....Imposs.....ible”

For the first time during the entire encounter, Leygur moaned.

The composure he once held had left his voice.

His black eyes, which had always kept their cool, opened wide in surprise.

Rain had stopped the crimson blade with his bare hand before it could reach his neck. Rain's hand--the five fingers of his left hand were wrapped around the blade so tightly that it couldn't even quiver.Though, it did dig into the flesh of his palm somewhat.

Then, he plunged the Siren's Blade in his right hand deep into Leygur's chest. The edge of the sword pierced through Leygur's back. It should have been a fatal wound.

“With only--one hand?!”

“Heh. Never underestimate a genius!”

Rain smiled triumphantly, ignoring the blood that was gushing out of his hand and side.

.....He had messed up a little, but he had managed to stop the blade with the flesh of his fingers, so all was well.

“I don't use this killing move that often because I'd lose my fingers if it failed. But, how about it; you surprised!?”

Keeping the fact that it was actually a move that he had thought of just now as an act of desperation to himself, Rain promptly drew out his magic sword. Copious amounts of blood burst of Leygur's chest.

“What?!”

It was Rain's turn to be surprised.

Leygur, who Rain had thought would collapse on the spot,

voluntarily threw down his sword and broke out into a run.

And at his destination was--

“Princess!”

Rain did not even have the time to catch up to him. Leygur easily kicked aside Leni, who had attempted to draw his dual blades against him in a panic, and grabbed hold of Princess Shelfa.

“--! P, please let go of me!”

Leygur smirked as he held back the struggling princess.

“In the end, I won, Rain.”

“You dirty bastard!!”

Ignoring Rain’s disparagement, Leygur moved his free hand in a complex pattern. He and the princess began fading out once he was done, and they soon disappeared completely.

“Goddammit!”

Rain plunged the magic sword that Leygur had left behind deep into the earth.

“Kris, let’s go!”

Rain staggered onto Kris and tried to gallop away.

“General! Where are you planning to go?!”

Leni asked as he came running with an ashen countenance. He likely felt responsible for the kidnapping.

“Don’t ask me something you already know! I’m obviously going to Zarmine! At full speed, Kris can get there in half a day!”

“N, no way. That aside, you can’t possibly go with those wounds.....

Even if it's you, General."

"Yeah, what he sai.....I mean, it's exactly as Captain Leni said! We should come up with a strategy first."

"I agree with squire! General, please prioritize treating your wounds first!"

Leni, Yuri, and Senoa, in that order, fervently stopped Rain with worry etched on their faces.

"This is nothing. --Hey, what's wrong, Kris?"

His partner refused to budge an inch.

Then, the horse shook her head as if she too was saying, 'no.'

"C'mon, Kris!"

At the very moment that Rain was angrily pestering Kris forward.

A sudden flash of light erupted high above Rain.

It was so bright that everyone in its vicinity instinctively shut their eyes.

"Wha, what's going.....whoa!"

"Rain!"

Rain tumbled off of Kris as "something" fell down from the heavens and clung onto him. Immediately realizing who that "something" was, Rain twisted his body mid-air so that he landed on the bottom.

"Urgk!"

It hurt like hell because he was already wounded as it was (any normal person would have long since perished). He was sure that he had definitely lost more than half the blood in his body.

“Owowow~ --Little one!?”

“--! Rain!”

Shelfa broke out into a bright smile as relief flooded over her--

But the blood immediately drained from her already porcelain white cheeks as she saw Rain's wounds.

“I, I don't want you to die!”

She hurriedly pressed her hands against his wounds, despite that her actions would achieve nothing.

She couldn't care less that she would get blood all over herself.

“No, more importantly, how did you--ah.”

It was truly about time.

Rain finally remembered the pendant that he had once given Shelfa. He had completely forgotten about until now.

“.....Th, that was pretty careless.....of me.”

And with that said, Rain passed out as a sense of relief enveloped him.

Epilogue - Rain, who was Born on a Rainy Day

An extremely off-key song resounded throughout the otherwise silent garden. The owner of the voice, who had often heard complaints such as, “stop singing or you’ll make my ears rot off!”, sang without a care in the world because no one was currently around to hear him.

And thus, Rain was singing happily on the banks of the lake--leaning against the Jura tree.Of course, Rain was not the type of person to hold back even if someone was nearby.

He was finally satisfied after singing well over ten songs.

A content smile emerged on his face.

“I was pretty good today.....it’s too bad that no one was here to listen.”

There was a ball held in commemoration of their victory today, so everyone important was gathered in the castle’s great hall. Only Rain secluded himself in the gardens behind Galfort castle.

Indeed, the battle that had taken place ten days prior had been a complete victory, if you ignored the fact that Leygur and Ganoa had gotten away, and there was plenty of cause to celebrate.

He would simply have to hack down Ganoa, who had managed to escape with his devilish luck, and feed him to the dogs at some point.King Leygur, however, would not be so easy to deal with.

Rain had definitely pierced through Leygur’s heart at that time. He had not thought much of it there and then because he was light-headed from blood loss, but Leygur should not have been able to move after that.

But he moved as if it was nothing, which means.....

It was a simple process of elimination. He who achieved feats that were impossible for a human, was not human.

A man who has the appearance of a human, but possesses such strength--long ago, there was a race that met these criteria. In other words, he's--

“.....And they were supposed to be extinct, too. You never know what you'll find in the world, huh?”

After a sigh, Rain was about to start singing again, but instead turned his head toward the abundantly blooming garden after sensing a presence that he was now quite intimately familiar with (and the pressure that accompanied it).

Sure enough, Princess Shelfa came walking up the path that was carved into the garden.

Today, she was dressed in a snow white dress that was tailored for the ball, further accenting her already radiant beauty. Other than her skirt, which was longer than what Rain would have liked, he thought she looked perfect.

He was especially pleased with how the dress hugged the curves of her body, from her thin waist to her gently blossoming bosom.

“You could make money just by standing around. You're pretty terrifying, and you'll get even more so as you grow older, won't you.....”

Rain mumbled something incredibly stupid.

“Yes?”

“No, it's nothing. That aside, aren't you the star of today's ball, Little one? Is it alright for you to ditch and come here?”

“The ball was so boring without you, Rain.I knew you would be here. I’m glad I found you.”

Shelfa sat down next to Rain and rested her head against his arm.Gently, with a hint of shyness.

--When Rain had finally woken up after a mage who knew healing magic had attended to him, he had found Shelfa by his bedside with bloodshot eyes. She had refused to leave his side ever since. She would follow him wherever he went. She had even attempted to follow him as he went about doing his business, which obviously troubled him greatly.

She probably thought that I’d die and got pretty scared. Well, it’ll probably only be a temporary thing anyway.

“Rain, how are your wounds?”

Shelfa gently placed a hand on Rain’s side.

“.....That’s like the thousandth time you’ve asked me that, you know? I’m telling you I’m fine. I’ve made a complete recovery. I’d have healed just fine on my own even without magic. I’m immortal.”

“I’m glad to hear it. But, I’m pretty sure that I’ve only asked about your condition about twenty times or so.”

Rain felt a sudden impulse to laugh at his ever-serious young mistress. However, he forced it down because he did not wish to trouble her. Instead, he asked her a question that had popped up into his mind.

“Come to think of it, Little one. Didn’t you say that you had something that you wanted to discuss with me?”

“No..... It wasn’t that I wanted to discuss something with you, but rather that I had something I wished to say to you.I’m sure that you’ve already realized what it was long ago, but I still wanted to say it properly for myself.....”

Said Shelfa as she lowered her eyes and blushed. Her mouth had clamped shut, and she seemed to have some trouble saying what she wanted to say out loud.

“.....In that case, should I say my piece first? I stopped talking part-way through when we first met, after all.Let me tell you an old story, Little one. It's a story about a certain boy who lived in his hometown.”

After giving Shelfa, who had raised her head, a gentle smile, Rain began his story in a detached manner.

At the northern edge of Murgenia, there's a tiny village called Noeg.

It's a pretty poor village too. Most of its inhabitants are farmers or woodcutters.

In fact, only the boy's family was different, because his old man was a skilled mercenary. But the boy himself preferred reading books. He had absolutely no interest in his old man's work. The boy was actually pretty well learned too, not that his smarts would've been useful to him in that tiny village. Well, not that it matters.

In any case, the boy had a girl that he liked. There was a girl named Fina who'd moved into the woods a little way from the village with her grandmother. She had long, chestnut-colored hair, and she was pretty darn cute. This was when the boy was thirteen years old.

Hm? Oh, Fina was the same age as him.

And, as stupid as it sounds, the boy fell in love with her at first sight. He fell so hard that he couldn't sit still if he didn't see her at least once a day. His old man teased him mercilessly, yup.

The boy's feelings really bothered Fina at first. Actually, he probably freaked her out. She wasn't very socially disposed, you see. To put it in a nutshell, she was extremely shy.

Even still, after a little while, the boy's feelings bore fruit. Fina, who

had rarely ever talked to him before, began to laugh all the time, and, after a little while, she opened up her heart to him and, in the end, the two were stuck to each other like two peas in a pod.

What was sillier was how they promised each other to be together in their future, despite the fact that they were just kids.

.....But, those dream-like days didn't continue on for much longer.

It happened on Fina's fourteenth birthday..... The boy was invited over to her house that day. Naturally, he happily ran over as fast as he could. It was his girlfriend's birthday, after all.

They spent the entire afternoon having fun together, but it was winter, you see. As luck, or the lack of thereof, would have it, a blizzard picked up. So, it was decided that the boy would stay over at Fina's house for the night, because there was no way he could make it back home in the snowstorm. The little cabin that Fina lived in was right in the middle of the woods and was pretty far from the village, so there was really nothing else that he could've done. The boy's parents were surprisingly understanding people too, and the boy himself was more than happy to stay the night.

But.....Sometimes bad things really just happen because you're unlucky, and there's nothing you can do about it. That day, a gang of bandits were chased up from a town that was to the south because wanted posters of them had been put up, and they just so happened to flee into the woods.

That night, the boy woke up to Fina's grandmother's screams. She was dead by the time he jolted up and ran to the room next door. She was lying face-down, surrounded by a sea of blood..... And Fina--she was crying while clinging on to her grandmother.

There were three of them. The boy tried to take on one of them, but he wasn't very strong to begin with. Plus, he was just a kid.He was knocked out almost instantly.

They started to ransack the cabin inside out, laughing their heads

off the entire time. But Fina and her grandmother were poor, and there wasn't anything of monetary value in their cabin. They'd always just scraped by with what they had. I, I wonder why they bothered to rob such a poor house to begin with.....

Eventually.....Eventually, they lost their temper.

"There's nuthin' here of any worth!" they said. They were probably drunk. Then, they suddenly pulled out knives. All three of them.

.....The boy was still wiped out from being beaten up, but he still tried to do something about them. He threw off Fina as she tried to stop him, and tried to face them again.....and this time, he was stabbed in the stomach.

And even still, even still, the boy was more fortunate than Fina by far. Fina tried to run to his side, sobbing.....and she incurred their wrath in turn.

The boy could only watch as the bandits murdered Fina in front of his eyes. All three of them attacked her, and cut her up into pieces.....and Fina screamed so, so many times. But she wasn't screaming for help, she was screaming, "run, run away!".....

After Fina died, and it was supposed to be the boy's turn, his old man kicked down the door and burst in. I don't know if I'd say that he was lucky or unlucky.....but the wanted posters had made it to his village by then. Though it was way too late.....

--There's nothing much else to say from here on.

It took an entire month before the boy was in any condition to talk. And, while it'd looked like the boy had returned to normal on the surface, he had never returned to being the book-loving boy from before. You could say that he was reborn.

He asked his old man to teach him how to use a sword and he practiced like he was crazy, and one day, when he was fifteen, he suddenly left his village.To gain more and more power. Because

he never wanted to experience something like that ever again.

To be stronger, stronger than anyone, stronger than anything else in the world! That was the boy's only wish.

But--

Rain spoke calmly, despite himself.

He gently pat Shelfa on the head as she trembled into his chest, her eyes never looking away.

“Of course, the boy always knew. Fina would not come back to life no matter how much stronger he became. He knew that what he was doing was absolutely pointless.”

His raw emotions had become uncovered as he spoke, and his voice carried a tinge of a quiver within it as he continued,

“But, there are times when you feel like you have to do something anyway, right? Something that you can't get out of your mind no matter how hard you try, and you just can't help yourself. That's why...!”

“--Rain!”

Making clear her distress and sadness, Shelfa threw herself at Rain with great force and wrapped her arms around him.

She held onto him with as much strength as she could muster and patted him on the back over and over.

She poured her everything into each stroke.....just like the time she had touched the wound he had received from the encounter with Leygur.

Rain smiled wryly and sprawled back onto the grass with Shelfa still clinging on to him.

Looking up at the clear blue sky, he whispered,

“Silly..... It’s just a simple old tale, you know? And besides--”

He turned to Shelfa and continued,

“It’s not something you need to be crying over.”

“But, but.....”

Shelfa stared at Rain with her eyes wet with tears and continued,

“You’re crying too, Rain.”

“Hey, that’s ridiculous--”

Surprised, he put a hand up to his cheek. When he brought it back in front of him, his hands were, in fact, moist.

“Would you look at that..... I haven’t cried since that day.....”

Rain gently whispered.

Rain stayed down looking up at the sky as he held Shelfa close to him in silence. She had finally calmed down after they had stayed like that for a few dozen minutes or so. Though, she was still sniffing in an adorable manner.

After they had sat back up and Rain had judged that it was okay, he asked,

“So, what was it that you’d wanted to say?”

“.....Um...”

“Hmmm?”

For some reason, Shelfa looked more reluctant to talk than she had before. She was fidgety, and became increasingly more flustered whenever she met Rain’s gaze.

Finally, she abruptly changed the subject.

“R, Rain.....is a bit of a strange name, isn't it? Is there some kind of meaning to it?”

“A meaning--well, there's a reason behind it, but it's a pretty stupid one? You still wanna know?”

No, not really. --Was the reply that he had been expecting, but, instead, Shelfa had asked in a lively voice,

“Of course. I really want to know!”

“Oh.....Okay. Well, I don't mind telling you..... But it's a secret for just the two of us, alright?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Then, I guess I'll tell you.You see, there was a record-setting downpour on the day I was born. And, my delinquent of an old man is an incredibly irresponsible guy.....rather, you can say he's a simple guy who likes alcohol and women, or that he's just a good-for-nothing.”

You get it now, right? Rain tried to convey his thoughts to Shelfa with his eyes, but she simply drew closer with an eager look on her face and said,

“Yes! And?!”

Damn you, old man!

I, your son, have to suffer this embarrassment because you went and did something so irresponsible!

Rain cursed his old man, who was likely far, far away, as hard as he could.

Then, he stood up and openly announced,

“No, that's--all there is to it. There was a record-setting amount of rain, so he decided to name me ‘Rain.’”

“--Eh?”

Shelfa did not understand at first and blinked several times.

Eventually, an indescribably complicated expression arose on her beautiful face.

Reluctantly, Rain said,

“.....You can laugh all you want, okay? I won't mind.”

Shelfa began to laugh faintly after receiving Rain's consent to do so. It was a clear laugh free of any malice, and it was nice to listen to. Rain had beaten up all the guys who had laughed at his name's origins long ago, but he couldn't bring himself to get angry at Shelfa.

On the contrary, he put a hand on her slim waist and pulled her closer and said something that he had never thought of before.

“Hey, Little one. You said before that you wanted to be with me.....”

“Y, yes, I did say that. And my feelings have not changed,”

Shelfa responded with a faint smile still lingering on her lips.

“.....I have an infinite amount of time anyway. So, I've decided. I'll stay with you for as long as you live.”

Shelfa slightly raised her head.

And once again, she threw herself at Rain and embraced him.

The two collapsed to the ground again due to her momentum.

“Really?! Do you promise?!”

“I promise. Besides, it's not as if the Zarmine threat has passed, either. Won't you need me to be here?”

“Rain.....”

Shelfa trembled from head to toe and burrowed her face against Rain’s chest, until finally, she raised her head as if she had resolved herself.

“I think I can say it now. Rain, I.....”

The azure sky had not a cloud in sight, as if it was extending its blessings to the two as they nestled close against each other. The temperature was not very cold, either, despite the fact that it was almost winter.

To the contrary, Rain was quite warm, thanks to Shelfa, who had smuggled up in his arms.

As a member of the kingdom’s royal family, Shelfa’s normal lifespan would reach several hundreds of years, but Rain would not recall this fact until much, much later.

Side Story - The Beginning of Friendship

The fortress was surrounded by hordes of enemy soldiers.

Ralphus sighed as he surveyed at his surroundings instead of using the watch-towers made specifically for that purpose.

What he saw was a mass of enemy soldiers, numbering several times more than his, packed tightly together.

They were radiating such dense bloodlust that he felt like it was rising up from them like a heat haze.

At this rate, it would be difficult for him and his men to break out of their situation on their own.

“.....Boss, our relief sure are takin’ their damn sweet time, huh~”

Said Gwen, his giant of an aide who was waiting patiently at his side, nonchalantly.

Gwen might have been panicking on the inside, but his heavily bearded face, which was reminiscent of a mountain bandit’s, did not betray the slightest bit of agitation.

Still, it could not be helped that the flames of anger flared through his large eyes.

.....They were within their enemy kingdom’s, Lunan’s, territory, at a small fortress located near the border.

The fortress was named Fort Hazam, and a highway passed through right next to it.

However, Ralphus and his men simply called the place, “the Fort.”

High General Ralphus and his men, numbering a little over a thousand, had begun holding the fortress a few days back.

The king and the other two high generals who had invaded Lunan with them had already retreated back into Sunkwoll territory, and only Ralphus' unit, who had been tasked to the rear guard, remained behind.

They had made it back to the fortress that they had occupied during their initial march, but soon found themselves unable to move any further once they had been surrounded by enemy soldiers.

Basically, they had fallen behind while retreating, and had inevitably ended up awaiting rescue from behind the walls of the Fort.

However, Ralphus was beginning to think that the decision to hold the fortress had been a mistake.

Their reinforcements had not come no matter how long they waited, despite the fact that the Sunkwoll border was close by, and the number of Lunan soldiers outside only continued to increase.

The enemy soldiers looking up at the lion insignia banner encircled the fortress two, three times, itching to act upon their longstanding grudge against Sunkwoll. They displayed the full force of their vim and morale even at night, as they vigorously burned watch fires in the darkness.

The Fort would fall at this rate.

The difference in numbers between the two armies was too great, and the fortress had originally belonged to the enemy to begin with. In other words, they knew all of the fortress' weaknesses.

That was why the enemy was eagerly surrounding the fortress. They had full confidence that the fortress would fall with time.

Naturally, however, Ralphus was not one to make his grim misgivings public.

Thus, he casually responded to Gwen and said,

“Indeed. Well, it can’t be helped that our reinforcements are a tad late. We’re in the middle of enemy territory, so they’ll have to exercise caution as they proceed. Let’s be patient and wait.”

After making sure that he had spoken in a voice that was loud enough for the guards to hear, he began to walk.

Understanding the look that his master had given him, Gwen followed not too far behind.

They met up with Nigel and headed for the great hall inside of the Fort.

There was a map detailing the surrounding region on top of two long tables that had been pushed together.

As he studied the map carefully, Ralphus whispered,

“.....Looking at it like this, we really aren’t that far from the border.”

The heavily bearded Gwen knit his brows and responded,

“Exactly. At full speed, we’d reach the border in an hour tops by horse. So why won’t His Majesty hurry up and send us some reinforcements?”

He began to grumble.

Then, Nigel, who looked so young that it was difficult to believe that he was really a knight, muttered,

“The Fort’s low defense and food stockpiles are going to be a problem. But our greatest issue at hand is probably that we’re almost out of drinking water.”

“Indeed. Who would have thought that the water was supplied from outside of the Fort?”

Ralphus let out a gentle sigh.

As he had said, the Fort, which had originally belonged to Lunan, relied on water from a well that was located outside of the actual fortress.

It seemed to have had been built as a temporary rest-stop for units invading Sunkwoll, or as a measure of surveillance against invaders from across the border.

It had not been built to withstand long term sieges. Moreover, Ralphus' unit of over a thousand grossly exceeded its intended capacity.

Due to the aforementioned reasons, their stock of water barrels was decreasing day by day. It was still only the beginning of autumn and the harsh lingering summer heat would likely cause the soldiers to dry up if they weren't given water.

Even Ralphus, who had kept his eyes glued on the hand-drawn map before him, could not come up with a brilliant countermeasure for their situation.

“.....In any case, we only have two options,”

He stated his conclusions after a moment of contemplation. He continued,

“One is to remain holed up in the Fort and wait for our reinforcements to arrive. The other is to break through and flee before we die of thirst.”



“Looks like we’ll be endin’ up with the second option,”

Gwen replied immediately.

Naturally, Ralphus and Nigel had also known this.

Judging by the fact that reinforcements had yet to come, the king was probably planning on abandoning them.

The units of other high generals were stationed near the border, and it should not have taken so long to send reinforcements had he the intent to do so.

The king had either judged that it was impossible to send reinforcements because of Lunan’s heavy defense, or--

Purposefully pushing a certain premonition aside, Ralphus said instead,

“.....Let’s wait a little longer for now. We can’t be certain that His Majesty won’t send reinforcements yet.”

Ralphus’ two aides saluted him in silence.

No matter how dissatisfied they were with the outcome, they would always defer to Ralphus’ final judgement.

Still, Gwen complained,

“Argh~, if we’d known that this would happen, we would’ve refused to be the rear guard to begin with. You never know what’s goin’ to happen in war.”

“You never know what’s going to happen--was it? No, that’s not always true; or at least it wasn’t this time.”

Ralphus laughed in a self-deprecating manner.

Then, ignoring his aides’ stares, he shook his head.

This time, the future had not been unknown.

At the very least, there had been just one person who had been able to foresee their current situation.

--With precise, pin-point accuracy.

Ralphus did not know any more about the man called Rain than he needed to.

They had never interacted with each other before.

Rain had the greatest military record in the Lunan War by far. His unit had never failed to bring back results whenever they sortied. He was a relatively well-known knight, and he used to be called the "Unknown Genius" before he came to Sunkwoll--etc.

To put it simply, Ralphus only knew of the man's past accomplishments.

He had swiftly risen from squad leader to centurion--and, as surprising as it was, was then promoted directly to high general.

It was difficult to believe that he had really been appointed to that position, despite his overwhelming military achievements.Or at least, it was difficult to believe if you took King Douglass' personality into consideration.

Still, unlike the other five high generals, Ralphus did not particularly dislike the man.

Instead, he was wary of him.

Because Ralphus had the feeling that.....that black-clad knight with the most defiant eyes would never truly ally himself with the kingdom.

It was all right as long as Rain, and his overwhelming military might, was on their side.

But, what would happen if Rain happened to turn against them? To put it simply, what would they do if Rain betrayed them? Ralphus could not ignore his quiet apprehensions.

Nevertheless--

It had been the day that King Douglas had decided upon yet another expedition into Lunan, something he had done many times during his reign.

Someone had called out to Ralphus from the corner of the passageway as Ralphus made to return to his chambers after the war council had safely concluded.

“.....Why did you cover for me before?”

Ralphus instinctively placed a hand on the sword at his side.

He had not felt anyone’s presence until the other party had spoken up.

“.....Sir Rain, is it? I can’t say that it’s very admirable of you to approach someone so suddenly from the shadows.”

Rain simply furrowed his brows at Ralphus’ reproach and repeated his question.

“His Majesty yells at me all the time. Why did you stop him at the risk of incurring his displeasure?”

“.....Is that so? This was the first time that you’ve attended a war council as a high general, so I hadn’t known.”

Ralphus smiled gently.

Rain looked back at him with a complicated expression on his face--. Then, he glared at him as if he was trying to peer through Ralphus’ heart.

Purposefully ignoring this, Ralphus continued,

“Regardless, I thought that your opinion was something to be valued. I understood your point that “the enemy has their own plans, so we should accommodate ours to reflect that.” But, perhaps you could have considered exercising more humility in your diction? I am sure that even His Majesty wouldn’t have become as angry as he was if you had.”

“No, I don’t think my manner of speech really matters.”

Rain lightly rubbed his chin and frowned. He continued,

“So is this how it is? You approved of my opinions, so you held back His Majesty’s temper?I thought that most nobles would ignore my humble opinions altogether.”

“Status has to place in a war council,”

Ralphus stated flatly. He continued,

“It’s only natural for a knight to endorse any beneficial advice when faced with war.”

Rain stared at Ralphus’ face in the dim darkness.

“I was taken off of this expedition..... But if you’d like, I have a piece of advice, no, a warning for you. Care to listen to my unwarranted meddling?”

“I’ll listen. --But this isn’t the kind of talk we should be having in the middle of a hallway. You should join me in my chambers.”

Thus, Ralphus listened after they had changed locations. To all of the ‘opinions’ that Rain had to share.

Rain explained his predictions as readily as if he was describing his own hands.

“During this expedition, Lunan will lose on purpose at first, and retreat to their capital.

However, they will not have actually lost.

No matter how far the battle progresses, and even if it looks like the expedition's succeeded, it'll all have been just for show.

Their real aim will be to lure the enemy--in other words, the Sunkwoll army deep into their own territory and turn the tables on us.

While retreating, the Lunan army will secretly launch a flying column and will cut us off from behind. Once they've completely encircled us, the force that'd been retreating will also turn around to counterattack.....for sure."

Rain flashed a grin from across the table as Ralphus strained his eyes and ears to listen. He continued,

"So, well, that's based off of the information I got from my spies, and the rest of it from here on out is just my guess."

"Hold on a moment! If you got that information from your spies, then why haven't you reported this to His Majesty?"

Rain leaned back heavily on his chair.

".....You probably didn't know this either. I've given His Majesty a similar report before. For a different strategy. But, not only did he yell at me, he even told me to stop using petty tricks? I've just gone ahead and did recon on my own ever since. Got a problem with that?"

Even Ralphus could not respond to that.

"No, I don't..... Please continue."

"Cool. These is just my guesses, or rather, my predictions from here on. Listen, Ralphus. His Majesty will start a war council once he realizes that he's in danger and will say something along the lines of this: "won't anyone take upon the duty of being the rear guard?" Considering the lineup of the other high generals who are

participating in battle, not a single one of them will stand up and commendably declare, "I will!" If there was to be someone who'd do that, it'd probably only be you. But listen carefully, this next part is important."

"--When that time comes, don't even think about volunteering yourself. Even if you happen to get nominated, stand your ground and refuse."

Silencing Ralphus with his eyes, Rain continued,

"And another warning -don't volunteer to be the vanguard when you depart for the expedition either. Stay as far back as you can. There'll be plenty of idiots who'll be more than willing to volunteer to be vanguard as long as they can't figure out that the enemy's set up a trap, so it shouldn't be hard."

Rain continued to list his 'predictions'.

He had even managed to predict which enemy commander would lead the unit that would pursue them and what kinds of tactics he would take. His predictions were so detailed and precise that Ralphus would have believed him if he said that he had just walked out of the enemy camp mere moments ago.

Once Rain had finally finished talking, Ralphus asked,

"Are you saying not to volunteer to be vanguard because the vanguard is the most likely to be tasked to be the rear guard when we have to retreat?"

"Exactly. It's only logical that if you lead the way there, you'll fall back to the end when you leave. Well, it wouldn't be a problem if you had the time to rearrange ranks. But, as far as I can tell, there won't be much time between the time that His Majesty notices the enemy's trap and the time that the counterattack will begin. If things go poorly, you might not even have enough time to arrange for a war council."

“.....I understand that part. But, will it really be that bad to volunteer to be the rear guard? It should still be possible to reorganize after His Majesty retreats and reinforcements arrive to support us, no? The reinforcements don’t even have to be from His Majesty’s army; Gilles’ and Safir’s army, who guard the border, would also serve the purpose just fine. It would be simple enough to send support from Cordelion or Greatark (their respective castles).”

“There won’t be any support!”

Rain declared bluntly. He continued,

“His Majesty won’t permit it. And Gilles and Safir won’t feel the need to incur His Majesty’s displeasure just to help you. In other words, you most definitely won’t have any reinforcements.”

When Ralphus found himself unable to respond, Rain began to speak to him in a quiet voice.

He spoke not with his usual fearless expression, but with a more solemn one.

--Ralphus Juliard Sunkwoll, you are a noble man. You are always true to your beliefs, you are not hesitant to express your opinions, and you have the resolve to see them through. You anguish over the kingdom without a shred of self-interest, so when you propose something on her behalf, you are always correct. And because you’re always correct, you’re a nuisance to those who aren’t.You’d do best not to forget that.”

Neither Rain nor Ralphus spoke for a while after Rain had finished speaking.

Then, Rain got up as if he was shaking off the veil of silence that hung between them.

Just before he left the room, he turned around and said,

“You’ll probably volunteer to be the rear guard and end up getting

surrounded by the enemy despite the fact that you believe my advice.It'll probably be at the fortress near the border? In any case, stall for as much time as you can when that happens. I'll try to get His Majesty to do something to help too."

When he said this, Ralphus broke out into a smile before he realized what he was doing.

Rain's predictions had been terrifyingly perceptive, and he felt that they had glimpsed through the truth.

Even now, he had been thinking through every possible scenario in his head and had resolved to act as the rear guard.

Because, at the end of the day, it was a role that somebody had to take on.

Since I can't heed Rain's warning, I suppose I'll simply have to fight my way through this one.

Still smiling, Ralphus asked his peer who had his back toward him,

"Why are you doing so much to help me?"

Rain turned back around and the edges of his lips curled upwards.

It was a truly bold smile, the kind that you would only expect to see in a dream.

"Thanks for asking! If you owe me a favor, then I'll get the better end of the deal in the future.....or so I thought. So, if I do end up helping, you better make sure to remember how I warned you tonight. Alright?"

"Understood; I'll repay my debt without fail if I survive."

Ralphus sent Rain out on his way with a big nod.

His smile deepened once the door had closed behind Rain.

“You want to use me, you say? You’re such.....a big liar.”

Ralphus’ personal evaluation of Rain had risen in heaps and bounds ever since that day.

He felt that he finally understood a little.....of what kind of man Rain really was.

“Boss?”

“Lord Ralphus?”

Ralphus stopped searching through his memories at the sound of his aides’ voices.

“It’s nothing; I was simply thinking of something that happened before we departed.”

He proceeded to tell them about Rain without leaving out a single detail.

Surprise slowly began to color Gwen’s and Nigel’s faces.

~~*~~*~~*~~

While Ralphus was thinking about Rain in the Fort, the person in question had arrived at Greatark, High General Safir’s castle.

It was lined up next to Gilles’ castle, Cordelion, and held an important position near the border.

King Douglas had successfully retreated and was resting his soldiers there.

After waiting for half a day to gain an audience with the king--. Rain was finally able to enter the room where he was staying.

The king was sitting heavily in the room that had originally belonged to Safir.

He stared haughtily at Rain from the end of an amber table that was large enough to dance on.

His mustache had been trimmed, and he donned a luxurious, brand-new vermillion mantle.

It was hard to believe that he barely escaped with his life only a few days prior.

--What do you want at a place like this?"

Ugh, I don't want to deal with him..... was written all over his face.

Rain made a show of bowing low to the ground.

"I must offer up my most sincere felicitations upon your gloriously safe return, Your most majestic Majesty."

Deep wrinkles furrowed in Douglas' brow at Rain's frighteningly sarcastic greetings.

However, Rain's face was the very picture of sincerity, so he could not find any faults to complain about.

Ultimately, he was forced to nod with a sour look on his face.

".....Indeed. I am sure it was due to the divine protection I received from my ancestors and from the war goddess Musra."

"Oh? And here I thought that Ralphus had played the biggest part in it,"

Rain raised his head and said indifferently.

There was a faint smile on his face.

A jolt of electricity ran through the king's eyes.

"What is it that you want to say, Rain?"

“May I sit before I begin? It’s hard to talk while kneeling or standing on ceremony.”

The king’s mood only worsened after Rain’s shameless request, but he allowed it for the time being.

“.....Very well. But I am tired. Make it short.”

“Then, allow me to be frank.”

Rain sat down at the same table as the king with a flop and stared directly at him.

His daring smile disappeared, and his ever-clear black eyes thoroughly enraptured his opponent.

It was so effective that the king, who had been sitting sloppily, corrected his posture before he knew what he was doing.

“Why aren’t you sending Ralphus reinforcements? There are four thousand soldiers between this castle and Cordelion, and ten thousand if you include the soldiers that retreated back with you. I find it difficult to believe that there aren’t enough soldiers to send as reinforcements. And the number of enemies surrounding Ralphus will only increase as time goes by?”

“Damn you..... How do you know so...”

Douglas stopped himself mid-sentence in annoyance. Perhaps he had discerned that playing along with Rain’s sarcasm would only be to his disadvantage.

Instead, he angrily cut in,

“Unlike you, I must decide upon things after taking the larger picture into consideration. Our army suffered a serious blow from the enemy’s cowardly trap. I cannot say that doing anything that would risk increasing our losses would be a good move. And the enemy is already waiting and prepared for us. I will have to carefully examine

the situation even should I send out reinforcements.”

Then, Douglas spat out his next words, fuming,

“And why are you so worried about Ralphus? I happen to remember you saying that you disliked the nobility.”

“Well, my preferences don’t really matter right now. So, in short, you’re waiting for Ralphus’ time limit to be up?”

The fearless smile had returned to Rain’s visage. He smirked brazenly at the king despite being a mere retainer and continued without hesitation,

“I suppose the reason that you’re abandoning Ralphus is either because his admonitions were finally getting on your nerves--or because you were worried about your seat on the throne. He’s popular for a retainer, after all.”

Finally, Douglas stood up with so much force that he knocked over his chair.

He grabbed his sword, which was leaning against the wall, and approached Rain with his face burning red with anger.

“How dare you speak to me that way, when I made you a high general just a few days ago?!”

Rain’s expression did not change even as the king spat out at him. He calmly stared up at his ruler without breaking his tenacious smile.

His response was whispered quietly.

Only, he had already had placed his right hand near his hips in the meanwhile.

“Are you planning on cutting me down here? I thought you were the one who investigated my past and scouted me to this kingdom..... Your Majesty. Do you really think you’re capable of killing me?”

“You.....bastard,”

Douglas growled.

The hand he used to hold up his longsword began to quiver.

“You’ll need my strength for the rest of the Lunan war, a sticky situation that you don’t know how to resolve on your own.....no? Wouldn’t it only be your loss, Your Majesty, to give in to your temper right now?”

Douglas glared at Rain so hard that he could have used his gaze to stab a lesser man to death--

But, ultimately, he returned to his seat.

“It’s true that I have acknowledged your strength. I’ve seen that you’re able to back up your claims time and time again. But Rain, don’t you ever forget. You promised me that you’d “make Lunan fall within five years.” I promoted you for this very reason. I won’t let you off so easily if you don’t fulfill your promise.”

“You’ve got it a little wrong there,”

Rain replied without missing a beat. He continued,

“I predicted that “Lunan will fall within five years.” It’s similar to what you said before, but completely different. Well, not that it matters much.”

Rain got up from his seat and looked down at Douglas, who looked thirsty for blood.

Then, he offered a few words of farewell.

“I guess my appeal for reinforcements was to no avail.And you clearly don’t want me here anyway, so I’ll take my leave.”

The king called out to Rain with an ill-tempered voice as the latter swiftly turned his back to him.

“Hold it right there, Rain! I don’t think you’d dare, but I will not allow you to send reinforcements for Ralphus. You will refrain from acting upon your selfish whims! If you break through the border with your troops in tow, I will consider you an enemy to attack on sight.”

Rain, who had stopped moving while the king said his piece, simply opened the door without bothering to turning around.

And with his back still to the king, he said,

“As you will. But, I’ve left my soldiers at my castle. So there’s no need for you to worry about that, Your Majesty.”

After saying his piece in a mocking tone, he left the room.

A single woman appeared just as Rain exited the room.

She was a blonde woman with a smart-looking mien, and you could tell that she was a bonafide noble just by looking at her eyes.

She was probably at least around twenty.

She looked at Rain while moving her long blonde hair out of the way and stopped in her tracks in mild surprise.

She was probably thinking something along the lines of, *what is a commoner doing here?!*

“.....Sir Rain, I take it? What are you doing here?”

“Well, His Majesty basically asked me the same thing just now. But--”

Rain scrutinized the girl, who was dressed in white silk, from head to toe.

Her clothes were first-class, but did not convey any unnecessary affectation, perhaps because the wearer did not have a liking for pomp.

“You nobles can be pretty rude. Tell me your name first. Shouldn’t that take precedence before you ask something of me?”

The beauty looked openly offended, but she honestly responded,

“.....My apologies. My name is Senoa Amelia Esterhart. I am pleased to make your acquaintance. And, may I have an answer to my question now?”

“Well, sure. I came here to complain to His Majesty and ask, “why aren’t you sending Ralphus reinforcements?””

To his surprise, the beauty--Senoa softened up a little after hearing his answer.

Her eyes, the symbol of her pure-blooded lineage, sparkled as she nodded over and over. She looked incredibly satisfied.

“.....I see. Your wording was a little discourteous, but I am here for the same reason.”

“Then, give it up for now. His Majesty’s in a pretty foul mood.”

She responded by tilting her head to the side, as if she was asking why, so Rain explained the situation to her.

“Hmmm.....”

Senoa bit her lips with a serious expression on her face.

Several seconds passed, and she asked a question as if she was anticipating something great from him.

“So, what are you planning to do, Sir Rain? Naturally, you’ll ignore His Majesty’s orders and send for reinforcements from Cortecreas Castle, yes?”

“Nope, not at all,”

Rain replied flatly.

Besides, he had no idea what was so ‘natural’ about the idea. He continued,

“Think of the distance from here to Astel. We wouldn’t make it in time. Besides, that’d get me in more trouble with His Majesty.”

The blonde beauty, Senoa, was rendered speechless.

Moreover, even Rain was surprised with how angry she became next.

She swung around a stylish longsword while trembling and passionately exclaimed,

“How could you say such pathetic things?! And here I thought you’d put your life on the line to aid a colleague--I’m so disappointed in you!”

“What do you mean you’re disappointed in me?! And why do you even know my name to begin with?”

“W, who cares about that?!”

Senoa suddenly fell into a panic and blushed.

Then, she quickly turned around and left in a huff.

The hell.....was that about?

Rain crooked his head to the side as he followed the slender retreating figure with his eyes.

~~*~~*~~*~~

Several days had passed as they impatiently waited for their relief to come.

They were in a situation where they could not afford to wait any longer.

One reason for that was because they only had about a day's worth of drinking water left.

In addition, another unfavorable condition had arisen.

Ralphus had received a report from a spy who had barely made it back to him alive.

It appeared that more enemy reinforcements were en route. It would become impossible to escape if they arrived, especially since the enemy already greatly overpowered them.

They had no choice but to break through.

They could not wait any longer.

"I suppose it's about time."

Ralphus looked upon his two aides in the great hall they were using as a command post.

Both of them boldly smiled rather happily.

"Aight! I've been gettin' bored with all this waitin'!"

Gwen began stomping his feet, and Nigel shared his sentiment for once.

".....I'm glad we'll no longer be standing by for no reason."

Alright, in that case--

There was a knock on the door right as Ralphus opened his mouth to speak. When Ralphus gave his permission to enter, Baldos, a centurion, saluted and came in.

He looked rather bewildered.

"General, a letter affixed to an arrow came in just now....."

He handed Ralphus a crumpled piece of paper.

In extremely sloppy handwriting, the letter read:

I'm sure that you're just about at the end of your patience, but I think you'll be super happy if you waited just one more hour.

Gwen twisted his bandit-like face into a frown.

“Ya’ll be super happy…… The heck is this? What does it mean?”

Ralphus started laughing before he knew it.

He had recollection of this particularly unique handwriting.

“Alright, we’ll wait for an hour. It would’ve taken us about that much time to prepare to break through anyhow.”

Exactly one hour later, Ralphus’ unit opened up the southern gate and charged out on horseback.

Their enemies roared and immediately rushed at them.

Holding his pike up high, Ralphus encouraged his men with a voice that reached the heavens.

“All units, advance! Show them how stubborn we can be!!”

Woooah!!

With a thunderous cheer, the cavalry began to move as one.

“How impudent! Do you really think we’ll just let you leave when we’ve cornered you this far?”

Ralphus roared at the first enemy who talked back.

“Enough with your nonsense! If you’re going to babble, then at least do it with your spear!”

Then, Ralphus' favored pike howled through the air.

The enemy staggered as his spear flew into the sky with the first blow.

With the second, his still-helmeted head followed suit, spewing blood.

The enemy captain, who had gallantly challenged Ralphus, fell from his horse with nothing to show for his efforts.

Furthermore, the Sunkwoll cavalry passed through, and even his corpse had immediately disappeared from sight.

Many other captain-ranked Lunan knights came to challenge Ralphus, but like the first, were all quickly defeated. The only difference in the manner of their defeat was where they were wounded.

Ralphus' spinning pike called forth a whirlwind of blood and only continued to draw more blood from its enemies.

Its wielder's silver-white armor was soon dyed with crimson blotches.

Initially, the Lunan soldiers lost ground to Ralphus' furious fighting, which had made him greatly renown as a knight.

Ralphus' allies roared as they gained momentum, while his enemies cowered at his skill and were forced into retreat.

When a tear had opened up within the enemy ranks, Ralphus, who boasted a sharp tactical eye, barked out orders.

"Everyone, to meee!"

They began to desperately push their way through the small opening where the enemy lines had collapsed.

Their enemies were centered in the direction of their homeland, but

Ralphus' unit, spearheaded by Ralphus himself, wedged their way through enemy ranks like a drill.

All they had to do was to keep attacking the weak spot they had created.

--However.

Once they had recovered from the fear brought on by the initial momentum, the veteran Lunan knights immediately regained their composure.

The commanding officer of the Lunan army, Ahmur, who had thick brows, gave his troops a shout of encouragement.

“Don't falter! Our army is five times larger than the enemy's. It's impossible for us to lose! Close the path to Sunkwoll! All units, converge! The enemy is sure to fall if we prevent their escape!”

This command greatly turned the tides of the battle.

All of the enemy soldiers, including the reserve troops, moved to encircle Ralphus' unit in a half-circle with their backs toward Sunkwoll.

Moreover, they packed multiples lines of soldiers together to create a thick wall of defense.

All with the intention of encircling Ralphus' unit so they could not escape.

After all, it was easy to come up with a counterplan if you knew exactly what your opponent wanted to do.

A moan of despair filled the Sunkwoll army as they saw the Lunan army get into formation.

“Hmph!”

Ralphus continued to spin his pike around like a waterwheel, but

his enemies simply kept coming one after another.

The difference in the two armies' sizes had been obvious to begin with.

Gwen and Nigel had kept up right by Ralphus' side, and were gradually beginning to show signs of fatigue.

Moreover, the enemy's insurance plan had arrived.

Ralphus finally looked up to the heavens as he saw the enemy soldiers that had been posted at the Fort's northern gate approach while kicking up a cloud of dust behind them.

.....I guess this is it.

At this rate, it would have been the end. However, the scales tipped yet again.

"Uwaaah!!

Ralphus and his men exchanged looks upon hearing a sudden cheer.

The Lunan army was just as confused, and Ahmur looked up and barked, "what was that?!"

That cheer, which seemed to shake the heavens, had come from the opposite direction--from north of the Fort.

Their allies that had been coming from the north were disconcerted, and multiple screams of panic and confusion reverberated throughout their ranks.

It was only natural.

No matter what happens, we will not be attacked from the north.

The entire Lunan army had had utmost confidence in this belief.

And thus, the unit stationed to the north had been comparatively weaker.

“A messenger, someone send a messenger to the northern gate!”

However, Ahmur’s orders were soon lost in a sea of distressed screams.

Several of them had cried out from various places within the Lunan army’s ranks.

“We’re in troublee! The enemy has appeared from the noorth!”

“It’s the reinforcements from Sunkwooll; their reinforcements are here! And their army’s huge!”

“They’re trying to block the path back to the capital. They’re not planning to let us escape!”

In any other situation, Ahmur would have found it suspicious.

It was suspicious that an ordinary soldier had grasped and shouted out information before the commanding officer had.

The direction where the enemy had arrived from was also suspicious. Why had they come from the north, instead of the south?

Still, Ahmur gave a strict order to, “beware of the enemy reinforcements!” because a very believable rumor that ‘Rain will come to Ralphus’ aide’ had been circulating through their ranks for the past several days.

Both the rumor and the numerous warning cries had been the doing of the spies that Rain had planted in the Lunan army as a part of his bigger plan, and Ahmur had fallen for both.

This was because Ahmur was sure that the cheers from the north had most definitely belonged to the enemy.

“Th, the enemy’s here? Who’s the commanding officer?!”

Right then, as if responding to Ahmur's question, lightning suddenly began to dance through the azure skies.

There was not a single cloud in sight, but countless bolts of lightning had suddenly appeared and attacked the army.

--For some reason, they only targeted Lunan soldiers.

Crackle crackle crackle!

Numerous bolts of lightning landed on panicked Lunan soldiers and finished them off.

Then, a single warrior rushed into the midst of the Lunan army, which had become a melting pot of chaos, atop a white horse.

It was as if he had been summoned by the lightning.

"Listen up, Lunan soldiers! I, Rain, will have your heads! Come at me if you wanna die!"

With an arousing shout, the black-clad man jumped into the fray like the gale wind.

"R, Rain..... He came!"

Ahmur had spoken in a voice so soft that it could have been a whisper, but Rain looked squarely at him.

"So there you are, Ahmur! Alright, today's the day I'll have your head, so don't you dare move, you hear?!"

And with that, the black shadow promptly charged with a force like raging waves.

He swept away or crushed the soldiers who blocked his path (because they could not flee in time) like paper dolls. None could stand before him, and onlookers wondered what on earth he had eaten to grow so strong.

He closed the distance in an instant.

No one could stop the charge of this lone man.

The tip of his spear gleamed like a nightmare.

“Re, retreat. Retreecat!”

Ahmur, a general known for his valor, decided to call for a retreat--

They had already crossed over the border by the time that Ralphus found a chance to talk with Rain.

He was able to fall in with next to Rain on horse just before the Jigrem River when the latter had finally caught up.

After Ralphus gave his thanks, he asked,

“The way you surprised the enemy by coming at them from their capital was magnificent. However, the men with you--”

He turned to the group that had followed behind them.

While they were armored, one close look made it clear that they were dressed in makeshift gear. Their equipment was too shoddy to have been made for war.

“They’re clearly not our soldiers, no?”

“.....They’re ‘grass.’”

“Grass?”

“Don’t you know? When you win over enemy citizens and secretly organize a resistance against the royal authority governing them..... It’s likened to sowing seeds for the purpose of growing grass.”

“No, I already know what the tactic entails. But, doesn’t it take a long time to organize and put into effect?”

Rain flashed a grin.

He looked as fearless as ever.

“Hey, you underestimate me. I had plenty of time, you know? How long do you think it’s been since I first came to this kingdom? I always have cards to play in times of crisis--mostly for my own benefit.”

Rain gave Ralphus a sidelong glance and softly sighed as the latter voiced his admiration. He continued,

“But, all the grass I’ve been growing up till now have come across the border thanks to the strategy I used. There’s no~thing left to use. I’ll have to start over from scratch.”

Then he smiled a tell-tale smile and added,

“.....So you better thank me for devoting my everything to rescue you. I told you before about how I was planning on having you owe me a favor, remember? Be my trusted, sturdy shield when I need you, alright?”

Instead of playing along with Rain’s antics, Ralphus fixed his posture atop his saddle.

No matter what the former said, Ralphus understood that Rain had risked his life to save him.

Ralphus reached out and grasped his friend’s hand.

“I understand.”

He stared deeply into Rain’s black eyes and kept his grasp firm, despite how much Rain seemed to dislike it.

“I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me today for as long as I live.”

Rain turned the other way looking visibly uncomfortable.

After they had returned home--

The king had found himself unable to punish Rain. The reason being was that Douglas had declared that he would not allow Rain to “break through the border with his troops in tow,” and technically, Rain had not disobeyed his orders this time around.

--And the person who had split hairs to insist upon this was none other than Ralphus himself.

King Douglas, who not only harbored a guilty conscience for refusing to rescue Ralphus, but was also intimidated by the silent pressure radiating from Ralphus’ blue eyes (although he was simply imagining it), could only nod in agreement.

On another note, Senoa only learned of what had happened after the fact and immensely regretted her actions while being so moved that she trembled with emotion.

Afterwards, she would run to Rain’s side.....but that would only happen a little while later.

Afterword

I have always wanted to become a “person who writes novels.”

To write a novel and see it lined up at the bookstore..... I have always aspired for that ever since I was a child.

The reason I don't say that I “*wanted to become a novelist*,” is because that place felt so far away from me.

Even now, I still feel that it is.

Thinking back, I was always reading books as an elementary schooler.

While my friends were playing dodgeball and baseball, I was traveling far away on a shaking train to the library and back.

It was my greatest pleasure to feel my heart beat excitedly as I touched upon numerous stories.

It was my wish to be buried in books.

I was happy as long as I was reading books. But one day, I want to be someone who writes them, too! I began to have such thoughts that were beyond my means.

When my elementary school teacher at the time asked me, “what do you want to become in the future?” I think I passionately brought only this to my teacher's attention.

But people change, for better or worse. Even I, who had always dreamed when I was an elementary schooler, changed little by little.

I was shown many of the things you would call the truths of the world, and I became unable to keep talking about my dreams like I had in the past. It sounds nice if you say that I had grown up, but in

other words, I had given up.

In truth, I should have had many other dreams too.

However, they had disappeared one after another as the years went by..... And ultimately only my first dream of wanting to become a “person who writes novels” remained.

Moreover I, being the lazy person that I am, only thought about what I wanted to be and did not put in the crucial effort needed, and a long, long time had passed by the time I realized this.

I’ll surprise my mother one day when I have my own book and show it to her. And she’ll be so happy..... I had secretly harbored such thoughts, but these wishes had become impossible to achieve.

It was probably around that time when I seriously panicked and fiercely began to write. My start had been truly late.

I don’t have any more time..... I told myself as I tried to slack off, and wrote long and short stories one after another--

Ironically, for whatever reason, the first short story I had written had, now, become a book.

Yes, *Rain* had originally been a hand-written short story of maybe thirty pages.

But, as I uploaded it on the net every day as a longer serialization, I was fortunate enough that it gained popularity--

Before I realized it, a thousand hundred-something people were coming to read it every day.

And this story, which was supposed to have been short, grew longer as I kept writing and had somehow become over two thousand pages long.

This time, I was very glad that I showed it off to the world, even if

it only in part.

I guess I should write about this novel too.

Although I love all of the characters that appear in this work--I especially love Rain.

Rain was the first character I created among all of the novels I've written, but I don't think I'll ever be able to create a character who tops him.

It somehow seems that he has the greatest presence among all of my characters, doesn't it?

To me, Rain's existence played a big part in transforming a thirty-paged short-story that was supposed to have quietly disappeared into a longer story of over two thousand pages.

I would be very happy if everyone who's read this so far also came to love Rain (and the other characters too).

And now, to the people who have continued to love this story ever since it was serialized on the internet.

Thank you so much for keeping up with a story this long.

If you guys had given up and abandoned this story, I probably would have abandoned it long ago as well.

I received comments in general, but I received many more comments when I was discouraged, as if they had been timed on purpose, and I found myself flustered and thinking, "there's no way I can stop writing now."

And thus, Rain's story has become a book. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Next, to all of the people who helped me get published.

Thank you so much for giving me a chance when I was still

relatively unknown. I watched on with disbelief every time my points increased.

I hope this book will sell and I will be able to repay your kindness.....

Next, I give my deepest thanks to the publishing company and everyone who helped me publish this piece. I'm sure that I troubled you all greatly because of my clumsy manuscript.

And lastly, of course--

I thank you, who are reading this right now, from the bottom of my heart.....

August 2005 - Takumi Yoshino

Paperback Edition Afterword

For those who are new, it's nice to meet you.

I'm Yoshino. Please treat me well. And, if there are readers who have been reading from before, thank you as always.

So, this is the first paperback volume of *Rain*.

To explain a little for the newcomers, this work was originally something that I wrote in between submissions. At the time, it had had a different title. This is a novel that I wrote with a feeling of ease and freedom after the more restrictive submissions.

Ironically, I wrote this as I pleased, but perhaps it was because the main character, Rain, made a strong impression..... In any case, there were people who fervently read this work even then.

This was one of the biggest reasons why, ten years ago, I diligently wrote *Rain* alongside the submissions that I had to write. Before I knew it, it had become a much longer story, and in the end, the story had matured into a manuscript that easily exceeded two-thousand pages, including additional material. Thus, *Rain* became its own tankobun^[1] and continues even now.

Speaking of tankobun, I have an unforgettable memory of when *Rain* became a book.

I'll omit the details of how this work got to be published because it was written in the other afterword, but a little while after it was published, I received a phone call from the publishing company.

If I remember correctly, I believe it had been a week after it launched.

“Rain is selling! We're printing additional copies!”

I remember being so happy I jumped up and down when I was told this over the phone.

What remains most in my heart is how much Rain had betrayed my expectations for the better by so much.

“Unlike the plain old boring me, he (Rain) is a weird guy, huh.”

--It was a moment where I seriously thought as such.

Hopefully, I will be able to see this story to its end. And I will keep hoping from the bottom of my heart that anyone who reads it will enjoy doing so.

Thank you to all the people who supported me in the making of this book.

And lastly, of course, I offer my most heartfelt thanks to you who have bought this book.

Takumi Yoshino

Footnotes

1. [\[↑\]](#) A specific book format generally reserved for Manga and Light Novels.

Credits

Translation [[Rainy Translations](#)]

eBook [[Olivki](#)]